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"YOU HAVE NOT DISTURBED ME. I WAS ONLY STARTLED AT YOUR RESEMBLANCE TO LORD WILMHURST!" SAID LORRAINE, BLUSHING.

A HEAVY BURDEN.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

WHEN the Ashtons first settled at King's Crofton no one suspected the secret which was kept so tenaciously or guessed at the heavy burden the family had to carry.

They seemed just a simple, ordinary family, not very clever or striking, but a pleasant addition to the society of the little town which welcomed them warmly, and pronounced them to be "very nice."

The small detached house in the London-road became quite a popular afternoon rendezvous for the fair sex.

Mrs. Ashton's tea and sponge cake were both excellent. If she talked little she was a capital listener, and as the ladies of King's Crofton dearly loved the sound of their own voices, this was a decided attraction in their eyes, and perhaps one

reason why they took such a fancy to the widow.

There was no master at Glen Rosa. Mrs. Ashton had a grown-up son, who, indeed, was the reason of her settling at King's Crofton, since he had entered the office of the leading lawyer there with a view to investing his small patrimony, and becoming junior partner in the firm, if on further acquaintance he and Mr. Verity were mutually satisfied; but Paul Ashton was a quiet, unobtrusive young man, who never asserted himself at home, which was perhaps as well, since his mother was quite capable of being master as well as mistress of the little household.

Mildred resembled her mother, she had her dark eyes and hair, but not her quiet decided manner, or her cheerful spirits. Mildred was excitable and always easily moved to joy or despair.

Paul must surely have taken after his dead father, for he was an utter contrast to his women-kind.

A tall, slight young man of six or seven and twenty, with brown hair, which would curl, however closely it was kept cropped; large dreamy

grey eyes, and a thoughtful expression, which at times was almost sad.

"A first-rate head for business," Mr. Verity said in discussing the new comer with his father, an old man, who had recently retired, "and a pleasant fellow enough, but somehow I don't take to him as I do to his mother and sister."

"There's a deal more in him," said Sir Isaac—he had been knighted on the occasion of a royal visit to his native town during his year of mayoralty—"I like what I've seen of young Ashton very much. If you take my advice, Basil, you'll accept him as a partner."

"If he would only speak sometimes," said the lawyer, half irritably, "he's brains, as you say, father; but yet it seems to me he tries to appear nothing but a writing machine."

Sir Isaac smiled. He was a very old man now, but his ready wit and keen intelligence had not deserted him.

"Mark my words, Basil, there's a good deal more in Paul Ashton than anyone expects, and I for one like him a great deal better than his mother and sister—clever, attractive women though they are."

The lawyer felt bewildered. He had a great

faith in his father's judgment; but in this instance it clashed entirely with his own. He did not dislike Paul Ashton. He thought he had business talents, but apart from these he could see nothing in him—nothing whatever; but he really admired the widow and her daughter extremely.

He was still some years under fifty, and he had only once visited the quiet house in the London-road, but it seemed to him such a pleasant place; a thought had struck him more than once that his bachelor abode would be a much more homelike place if he persuaded Mildred Ashton to come there as its mistress.

Sir Isaac saw the impression he had made, and continued,—

"Has it ever struck you, Basil, how very little we know of the Ashtons. They are tolerably intimate with a great many people here; but I don't believe they have ever mentioned their past life to one of their acquaintances at King's Crofton."

"They are not great talkers," admitted Basil; "but we know all that is needful. Young Ashton was articled to your old friend Melville, and remained in his office after he was admitted a solicitor until he came here. The widow has an annuity of four hundred a year; she makes no secret of this income."

Sir Isaac dropped the subject. His son had not convinced him; but the old man had no fancy to be laughed at for his romantic fancies, and so he did not even hint to Basil his suspicion that there was a secret in the lives of the little family at Glen Rosa, and they had some reason for their strange reticence about their past.

That very night Paul Ashton was going home with an usual feeling of depression at his heart. He was surprised to find Mildred alone in the drawing-room engrossed in a novel.

"Why, where's mother?" he asked, quickly, for it was not like Mrs. Ashton to be absent at six o'clock on a November afternoon without some special cause.

"Gone to London," answered Mildred. "She started by the three o'clock train, and said she should not be back till Thursday."

A cloud crossed Paul's brow.

"Why did she not tell me at lunch?"

"She was afraid you would say something against it," returned Mildred, petulantly; "we know you always grudge us the least bit of pleasure; if mamma was dependent on you for every penny she spent you could not be more disagreeable."

People at King's Crofton would have been astonished at this outburst from the girl they regarded as so sweet-tempered and affable, but Paul was quite accustomed to it, he was nobody at Glen Rosa, his mother and sister made common cause against him.

Poor fellow, he would gladly have come alone to the bright Hertfordshire town, but Mrs. Ashton had set her face against that steadily, accusing him of selfishness for the bare suggestion, two women living quietly alone in a London suburb would soon drop out of society, she declared; it was Paul's duty to make a home for her and Mildred.

He went upstairs to wash his hands with a heavy heart; Sir Isaac Verity had been quite right in saying the Ashtons had a secret in their lives; Mildred was utterly unconscious of it, but Paul was five years older, and he knew enough of the mystery to poison his whole future.

Looking back, he could never remember a time when his mother had cared for him; from his earliest recollections she had shown him no affection.

He was sent to boarding school before Mildred was born, and he remained there till he was twelve years old, when a shadow fell on his mother's life; she removed from Sydenham where she had lived ever since her marriage, to a small house at Kilburn, and suffered Paul to come home and learn without one word of warning, by her widow's weeds, that his father was dead.

She refused to answer the boy's eager questions, would not even allow him to visit his father's grave; she spoke in a dull, cold way, telling him her income was now so small she could not afford

to keep him at boarding school, he must live at home and go daily to one of the large London schools where education was cheap, and as soon as possible he must begin to earn his own living, for she needed her whole income for Milly and herself.

Looking back on that part of his life, Paul always felt depressed. He had a brilliant career at school, but his mother never seemed proud of his success.

His great friend Jack Hastings was an only son, and easily got permission to invite his chum on long visits in the holidays. General Hastings grew fond of the bright, handsome boy, and when he was left childless, he interested himself in Paul's career almost as warmly as he might have done in his own dead son's, not only giving him his articles and an allowance while he was serving them, but bequeathing him three thousand pounds with which to purchase a junior partnership later on, "and don't fret my lad over your mother's coldness," the kind old man had urged, "depend upon it her heart will turn to you some day."

But Paul doubted it; never in all those years had his mother given him one loving word. He knew no more of her business affairs than a stranger.

His father had been an artist, a profession which does not generally enable men who die without making a name, to provide handsomely for their families, but though Mrs. Ashton often pleaded poverty, he found she never denied herself or Mildred anything she thought desirable, and her income, from whatever source it came, was as sure as clock-work.

He was just "admitted" when he discovered Mrs. Ashton's secret, or part of it. A sprained ankle kept him to the house for ten days, and during that time his mother went away and was absent two nights. She told Mildred she was going to stay with the Eldreds, acquaintances of theirs who had lately settled at Brighton. Unfortunately, while she was away, Bob Eldred, who had been at school with Paul, wrote to his old friend, saying he was alone in lodgings as his parents were abroad having let their house.

Thinking over things, Paul recalled that his mother usually went away in May and November, avowedly to stay with friends, that Mildred never accompanied her, and—strange chance—the "friends" never returned afterwards to her visits. A great and terrible fear settled on the young lawyer, and when Mrs. Ashton returned he insisted on an explanation.

"You have not been to the Eldreds, mother, they are abroad."

"I'm sure it's no business of yours where I've been," she retorted sharply.

"While I live with you I have a right to know what concerns you; you go away twice a year, I insist upon knowing the cause of these journeys which you have taken every year since my father's death."

"And if I refuse to tell you?"

"I shall go over to Sydenham," he said quietly, fixing his eyes on her face intently; "you lived there for ten years and had many intimates; you have chosen to drop them all of late years, but I can easily trace one of them—the doctor who attended my father in his last illness, for example—and inquire from them what secret you are concealing."

Mrs. Ashton never winced.

"You had much better not seek to know it; it will only trouble you."

"I insist upon hearing the truth."

Mrs. Ashton gave up the contest. She was furiously angry, and she did not spare him.

Her husband, Keith Ashton was not dead, as she had given out, but confined in a lunatic asylum, hopelessly, incurably insane.

"And you could give out that he was dead?"

"I was justified," she replied coldly. "I would not blight Mildred's whole future. My income dies with me. She will be penniless when I am gone, unless she marries; and who would marry the child of a lunatic."

Paul's first feeling was that he must leave Kilburn. He could not endure the labyrinth of deceit in which his mother had involved herself.

But, after all, she and Mildred were his only close ties. He loved them both devotedly.

The sum he paid for his board added to his mother's income. Better, surely, he should remain with them; and if he saw any one attracted by his sister, warn them of the terrible heritage she might have to face.

For himself the awful truth had made only one course possible—he would go down to his grave unmarried.

This was the secret which darkened Paul's life, and made him so cold and reserved in his intercourse with his fellow-men.

Sometimes he thought he and his mother would have been happier apart; they looked at everything so differently. He hoped, when he went to King's Crofton, they might have made a change; but she refused peremptorily to be "deserted," so he had to yield.

The pretty house in the London Road was taken, and Mrs. Ashton became more popular than she had dreamed of.

The firm of Verity and Son was old-established, and Basil Verity's receiving Paul as a possible partner was a guarantee of the Ashtons' respectability. Glen Rosa was a far more tasteful abode than the dull house at Kilburn. Paul paid his mother two hundred a year for his share of the expenses, and she laid out the extra money to the best advantage.

But what a miserable, divided family it was, Mrs. Ashton well-nigh hated the son of whom so many mothers would have been proud. She taught Mildred to regard her brother as a tyrant who would gladly deprive her of all pleasure and amusement, a lesson the girl was quick to learn; and Paul's heart often ached at her sharp, bitter speeches.

Of course, he knew perfectly where his mother had gone now on one of those half-yearly expeditions which were such a grief to him.

Mrs. Ashton had extorted a promise from her son never to reveal the truth about their father to Mildred, a promise the more readily given because the young man had his own secret fear that the girl's excitable brain and ever-varying spirits marked her out as one liable to inherit her father's fate.

For himself, strange to say, Paul had no fear. He should never marry—that much he had resolved; but he had not the least dread that the curse of insanity would be his portion.

He was only twelve at the time of Keith Ashton's supposed death, but he could remember perfectly the handsome, careless father, whose reckless extravagance, brilliant spirits, and charming manners had at times been exchanged for almost morose severity, utter dependency, and fits of ungovernable passion. No; little as he resembled his mother, Paul knew he took even less after her much-loved husband, and this was his greatest comfort.

The Ashtons dined late; it was the custom at King's Crofton. Paul sat opposite his sister, and thought how pretty she looked. Mildred, her momentary ill-humour forgotten, was in one of her brightest moods.

Her mother would bring her a new evening-dress from London, and in it she would eclipse all rivals. She was only twenty, but she had all a girl's natural interest in her own appearance.

She talked to Paul gaily. Had their mother been at home she might have sulked with him; but Mildred Ashton was far too fond of her own voice to cut herself off from all chance of using it.

"I saw Mr. Verity to-day in the High Street, Paul. Why do you never bring him here?"

Paul felt guilty. His mother had thrown out sundry hints that Basil Verity was seeking a wife, and that Mildred would just suit him; but the young lawyer would never help in that scheme.

"He hasn't time for afternoon visiting, Milly, and we don't give dinners."

"He is very amusing. I wonder he doesn't live with his father."

"I can't enlighten you as to the reason, Milly. It's not want of affection, though, for I never saw father and son more attached."

"I wish papa had lived," said Milly sadly. "Of course, I was such a little child when he died I can hardly remember him; but when I

see other people with fathers I seem to know what we have lost."

Paul changed the subject almost abruptly.

"I had a wonderful honour to-day, Milly—at least, I am sure you would think it so. Fancy your dull, prosaic brother *tête-à-tête* with a real, live nobleman!"

Milly opened her eyes in wonder.

"Mr. Verity must have a good practice, Paul, if he has a noble client."

"It wasn't a client exactly. When the Castletons went abroad they left the letting of Woodcote in our hands, and the 'nobleman' came after that."

"I thought noblemen always had 'places' of their own."

"Very likely; but you see this neighbourhood is famous for hunting, and Woodcote is just in the centre. I think most likely Lord Wilmhurst will take the place."

"Lord Wilmhurst," repeated Milly admiringly. "What is he like, Paul—where does he come from?"

"Well, my dear, the oddest part of it is he is like me. The clerk who showed him in (he didn't give his name) was under the impression he must be my elder brother. He's the Earl of Wilmhurst, and his property is in Kent. He looks about thirty or a little more, and is, he informed me, a lone, lorn bachelor."

"I hope you invited him to come here."

Paul shook his head.

"Susan and Jane would go into fits at having to wait upon a real live lord, and, Milly, though Glen Rosa's a nice little house, it wouldn't be grand enough for an Earl."

"Does he live all alone?"

"Not exactly; he has an aunt who presides over Wilmhurst Castle. He seems to think, however, that Lady Maria will not accompany him to Woodcote. I was very much taken with him, Milly, there was something so frank and unaffected about him."

CHAPTER II.

LORD WILMHURST quite deserved the praise Paul Ashton had bestowed on him. He was a pleasant-featured, sunny-tempered young nobleman, who had contrived to reach the age of thirty without making a single enemy, and who, strange fact, had never in his life known a serious trouble.

He could not remember either of his parents—his mother died at his birth, his father when he was five years old. But his aunt, Lady Maria Dene, had brought him up, and lavished on him as much affection as though he had been her own child.

Lady Maria was a spinster. She had passed her sixtieth birthday, and was proud of her snow-white hair. She did not go in for any of the modern attempts to conceal her age; she would have scorned them. A clever, clear-headed woman of the world, she had one over-weening fault, condoned by her friends for the sake of her other good qualities.

Lady Maria was intensely proud; her family counted their descent from the Norman kings, and she really believed hardly anyone in England could equal, and no one at all could surpass, the Denes of Wilmhurst.

She had been her nephew's sole guardian, and people predicted he would grow up a mild, effeminate young man, but Lady Maria knew what she was about.

Lord Wilmhurst went to Eton and Oxford. He made the "grand tour" in charge of an experienced tutor. He was given all the opportunities of seeing life which come to most young men of fortune, and the result was that he was the best shot, the most daring rider, and one of the keenest sportsmen in his own county; while the only fault ever brought against him was—that he did not marry.

Lady Maria deplored this solitary blemish quite as much as the mothers who were anxious to see their daughters Lady Wilmhurst. Again and again she reminded Noel of his "duty," but he only laughed and declared there was "time enough yet."

The Denes were long-lived. If anything happened to him before he had provided himself with a son and heir, why, his great-uncle, Roger Dene, who had emigrated some thirty years before, was reported to have left quite an army of descendants.

Nephew and aunt got on famously. Lady Maria was still active and energetic. She made a capital hostess, and did the honours of Wilmhurst Castle with stately grace. She took an interest in all Noel's amusements, and when he announced he thought of taking a furnished house in West Hertfordshire to enjoy a season's hunting in that neighbourhood, she warmly approved.

"Well," she said to him, when he announced that he had taken "Woodcote for six months," "of course, you'll have to come back here for Christmas; the Castle has never been shut up then. What sort of a place is Woodcote?"

"A snug little box enough. Will you come there with me, there's plenty of room for you and half-a-dozen visitors into the bargain. You'd better come, Aunt Maria," the young Earl added affectionately; "you'll be awfully dull here all by yourself."

Lady Maria looked pleased. Noel was the only human creature she cared for; it was pleasant to think he returned her regard.

"I'll come and help you settle there at any rate. What kind of a place is it, a village, or just a hamlet?"

"Woodcote is only two miles from King's Crofton."

Down went the corners of her mouth.

"My dear Noel, a small country town is always a hot-bed of gossip, and the society there is terribly mixed."

Noel laughed heartily.

"King's Crofton is not so very small, Aunt Maria; and, except exchanging a few formal calls, you need not know anyone there unless you like."

"I hope you won't get into low company," she said anxiously; "you know, Noel, it's the only fault I find with you—you've not half enough pride."

Lord Wilmhurst smiled lazily.

"I am sure, Aunt Maria, you have enough for both. I think you must have had my father's share, too."

"Why," asked Lady Maria stiffly; "it's impossible you can remember your father?"

"Oh, yes; but I've picked up little anecdotes about him here and there from old friends of his. If they are right he hated show and display, and was never so happy as when he could drop his title and go off by himself on long sketching tours."

"It was a terrible mistake," said Lady Maria.

"I suppose grief for my mother's death first made him a rover," said Noel, gravely. "It must have been terribly hard to lose her within a year of their wedding-day."

Lady Maria had no mind to tell her nephew his parents' marriage had been a miserably unhappy one. The wealthy heiress had been almost forced by her father to accept Lord Wilmhurst's ancient title. He had been persuaded into proposing to her by his sister, and the results were so terrible that but for the young wife's early death, dishonour might have fallen on the grand old castle. Noel had never heard a word of all this, and his aunt had no idea of enlightening him.

"When can you have possession of Woodcote?" she asked, abruptly, as though to change the subject.

"At once. Shall we go there on Monday, that will give you three days to prepare."

"Monday will suit me admirably. If you have no objection, Noel, I'll take Dolly Lorraine with me. I shall want a companion while you are hunting, and I know the vicar will be glad for her to have a change."

"Take her by all means," said the Earl, cheerfully, "if only you would take as much interest in Miss Lorraine's future as you do in mine she might return home an engaged young lady."

His aunt vouchsafed no reply. She was partial to little Miss Lorraine, because she liked a pretty girl about the house, and though the

vicar was as poor as the proverbial church mouse he came of a most ancient and honourable family. Lady Maria's pride had nothing mercenary about it. She worshipped "birth" not money; given a millionaire parvenu and a penniless lad with a long pedigree she would have preferred the latter. For her brother she had secured not only a wealthy bride, but one whose blood was of the bluest. The result had been misery, and now she would be well content to see Dolly Lorraine her nephew's wife, even though she was quite aware that the trousseau and even the bridal dress must come out of Noel's pocket if they were to be worthy a Countess.

Unfortunately Noel showed not the least sign of falling in love with Dolly; he and she were the best of friends, but they had been so ever since Dolly's nursery days, and anyone more experienced in love affairs than poor Lady Maria would have known the young pair were far too much at ease with each other for their friendship to develop into anything warmer.

Lady Maria was at the Vicarage by ten o'clock the next morning. She was always out and about early, so probably she did not reflect this was an inconvenient hour at which to call on an impecunious family, but the Lorraines knew Lady Maria well, and her "little ways" did not put them out; besides, they had long since given up trying to hide their poverty. They hated shams, and never made use of white lies to excuse their shabby furniture. Perhaps this was one reason why Lady Maria was such a staunch friend to them. She admired their courage.

"Take Dolly away on a long visit!" exclaimed Mrs. Lorraine with a grateful blush, "why it would be the making of the child, but I don't know whatever the little ones will do without her."

"The little ones must manage for once," said Lady Maria. "We are going on Monday, and I will call for Dolly on the way to the station. You need not be uneasy about her, Mrs. Lorraine. I shall not let her go out in the damp, and I'll dose her with cod liver oil if she coughs, I promise you."

The Vicar smiled. His house was low and damp. His first-born had to suffer from the disparity of his income (which was four hundred a-year) to the needs of his seven children. Nothing ailed Dolly but weakness and want of tone. Change of air, dainty food to tempt her failing appetite, a perfect rest from overwork and hardships—why these things would make his darling herself again.

She came in just as Lady Maria was leaving. Such a pretty girl, it seemed odd Lord Wilmhurst should refuse to fall in love with her. Dolly was twenty, a dainty mignon figure, a delicate wild rose complexion. Blue eyes, too bright for perfect health, and masses of soft black hair.

"Monday!" she exclaimed in consternation, thinking of the endless needlework required to make her poor little wardrobe pass muster.

"I'm afraid I shall never be ready."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Maria, sharply. "You can pack your things to-morrow, if you think it wicked to do so on Sunday. You won't want much. I'm not going to a desert island, child. There are plenty of shops at King's Crofton, and as I'm your godmother, of course your father will let me choose you whatever I like and Hilton my maid is very quick at needlework."

Lady Maria went off escorted to the gate by the Vicar. Dolly looked at her mother.

"You know it's shameful of me to run away dear, when you've all the Christmas treats coming on and the boys will be home from school; but I'm so tired I do believe I like the idea of doing nothing."

"I am very glad for you to go, Dolly. The change will do you good, and there are so few people Lady Maria likes."

Dolly nodded.

She doesn't get half as much pleasure out of her life as she might. Why, if I were mistress of such a glorious old place as Wilmhurst Castle—

Her father's entrance interrupted her, for Mr.

Lorraine had heard the last words, and said, gravely,—

"Do you know, Dolly, that if Lady Maria had her own way you would be mistress of the Castle?"

Dorothy blushed.

"But you see, dad, two other people have a voice in that question, Lord Wilmhurst and myself. He will never ask me to marry him, and I'm glad of it, as I should certainly say, 'No, thank you!'"

"I wonder why," said Mrs. Lorraine, gently; "he always seems to me a charming young fellow."

"He's perfectly delightful," agreed Dolly; "but I don't think he's got it in him to care for anyone very much, and if I ever had a husband I should like there to be no mistake about his attachment."

She spoke so calmly and practically that they felt she meant just what she said.

"I'm glad of it, Dorothy," said the Vicar, gravely. "Noel Dene's a capital fellow, but—he's his mother's son, and the last Countess was a woman I detested."

"Very wicked of you, dad. Poor, pretty young girl. What was there in her to detest?"

"She married her husband for ambition, and led him a miserable life. There's an old legend, my dear, that if the Dene's marry unhappily they go to the devil; and I confess poor Wilmhurst seemed on his way there when death released him."

It was not a wonderful journey from Wilmhurst to Woodcote. The first place was two hours south of London, the latter an hour and a half north-west.

Lady Maria chose to stop at Victoria, and have a very elaborate lunch at the Grosvenor Hotel. Her nephew was not sorry as it enabled him to telegraph to Woodcote the exact time of their arrival—servants, horses and carriages had been left by his landlord. He was taking a couple of hunters, his own head groom, and Hilton, the ladies' maid, so extolled by his aunt; for the rest they would depend on local resources.

It was just half-past four when he handed his aunt and Dolly into the brougham at King's Crofton station, promising to follow them in an hour, as he had to see the agents respecting one or two minor details of the agreement.

The carriage was well-appointed, the servants respectful. Lady Maria was quite contented with their appearance, only as they drove through several roads of private houses before they got out into the country lanes, she told Dorothy Kings Crofton was a much larger place than she expected, and she did hope all the people in those horribly new looking red-brick houses would not make a point of calling at Woodcote.

"I expect it would be too far unless they keep a carriage," said Miss Lorraine, gravely. "Oh, Lady Maria, there's the Earl! How can he have got here before us?"

"Nonsense, child!" said Lady Maria, sharply; but in her heart she confessed the young man walking down the quiet road was strangely like Noel.

It happened the horses were going quite slowly at that moment so she had time to get a full view of the stranger.

"Noel couldn't be here," she said, gravely; "besides that man is half a head taller."

"And he's dressed differently," admitted Dolly; "but really, Lady Maria, it's a wonderful likeness."

Mr. Castleton's housekeeper, a solemn dame in black silk, received the ladies respectfully, and showed them to their own rooms.

Dolly had never enjoyed one so luxurious before; the bright fire, the lighted candles, and the closely-drawn curtains, which shut out all breath of the winter's night, made a cosy little sanctum, and when Hilton came in presently with a tray of tea and cake it really seemed to little Miss Lorraine that she must be in a dream and would wake presently to find herself in the bleak, cheerless attic at home.

"Dinner's at eight, Miss Lorraine," said Hilton, "and my lady says you must lie down and try to get a nap. I'll come back in plenty of time to unpack your things and help you dress."

"I don't feel a bit sleepy, Hilton. This seems a charming house."

"Well, miss, it's pretty enough," said Hilton, grudgingly "and nicely furnished; but it's not to compare with Wilmhurst Castle, and why a gentleman, who has every comfort at home should want to hire a little place like this I can't make out."

She went off with her teatray, and Dorothy stretched herself on the sofa, knowing that Lady Maria was quite capable of coming in person to enforce her commands.

Perhaps Dolly was more tired than she had thought, for her eyes soon closed, and in less than half-an-hour she was fast asleep—asleep and dreaming, for she saw before her two men—Noel Lord Wilmhurst and the stranger who resembled him so oddly, and the most wonderful part of it was that the two seemed close friends. They were talking earnestly, and she caught these words in the Earl's well-known voice,—

"You have suffered terribly, but you have all your future before you. For my sake forgive. It is the only favour I can ever ask you."

In her dream Dolly bent forward anxiously to catch the answer to this appeal but none came, and even as she waited for it she awoke.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. ASHTON returned from her solitary expedition looking so haggard and tired that Mildred declared her mother must never go to London alone again, and Paul felt certain some fresh trouble had befallen her.

He never willingly spoke of the awful discovery he had made; after the first stormy conversation he never, if he could possibly help it, alluded to his father.

Mrs. Ashton had told him very little, that had almost been dragged from her, but her son never asked further details.

The malady was hereditary, and Keith Ashton's mother had begged her son on her knees not to marry and bring the curse into another family; her prayer had been disregarded, and for some years all had gone well with the young couple. Mrs. Ashton declared it was exposing himself to the sun during an unusually hot summer which had brought out the fell disease.

The doctor gave her not the smallest hope of her husband's recovery; he was so violent it was impossible for her to keep him at home, her own life or Mildred's would have been forfeited; he was in a private asylum in Berkshire, where he had every comfort.

All this Paul knew, also that his mother, in her extreme caution, would never write directly to the asylum, never receive a letter straight from there. She might easily have performed the journey in one day, but to avoid being traced to Thornton, she always started from and returned to London, the extreme precautions she took seemed to Paul a heavy price to pay for keeping her secret.

He had hoped her wan, anxious air would wear off when she had been at home a day or two, but her melancholy seemed rather to increase, and at last Paul resolved to ask her what was the matter.

He waited till Mildred had gone to bed, and then speaking kindly and considerately, he begged his mother to tell him what was troubling her.

"Much you'll care," she answered scornfully, "you have no natural affection in you."

Paul might have retorted he never received any from her, but he only repeated his question.

"The matter," said Mrs. Ashton, wearily, "everything's the matter. I'm very ill, Paul. I would not see one of the doctors here for fear of frightening Mildred, but I went to a physician when I was in London, and he thinks badly of me."

"What is it?" asked Paul gravely.

"Heart disease! I am not to exert myself in any way, never walk up hill, I am to avoid all excitement and emotion of any kind—or I shall die."

Paul tried to speak soothingly.

"King's Crofton is a level place, and you know, mother, you have no need to exert yourself; both

the servants we have now seem very capable; you must leave more to them; as to the excitement, I wish I could persuade you to give up your visits to Berkshire."

"I have given them up; I shall probably never see my husband again, but keep free from anxiety I can't. Surely, Paul, you know that my income dies with me?"

"I know it is said so," the young fellow flushed hotly, "but if this income came from my father, surely it must be his while he lives."

"It never came from him," said Mrs. Ashton, sharply. "I had seven hundred a year when I married him; he earned a little by his pictures, but very little, not enough to keep him in pocket-money. Since his illness, I have paid three hundred every year to the people in Berkshire, the rest has gone in housekeeping. I have saved a little, not much; if I die what is to become of your father and Mildred?"

"I will do my utmost," said Paul; "surely mother you don't doubt me?"

"Yes I do; you will grudge the tax on your income, you will be for putting him into a cheaper place, and letting Mildred earn her own living, you are utterly heartless."

Paul looked at her reproachfully.

"If you doubt me, you can appeal to the people from whom your income comes. If you prefer their word to mine, ask them to provide for Mildred and her father."

She looked him steadily in the face.

"There are no 'people' in the question; my income is a Government annuity, purchased for me by my father."

Paul's eyes met hers; she was his own mother, but he had found her out more than once in falsehood; he knew it was a falsehood she told him now.

"What do you wish me to do?" he asked gravely.

"Nothing. I shall take every care of myself for their sakes. I pray I may yet live to see Mildred happily married."

After that things regained their normal condition at Glen Rosa. It was given out that Mrs. Ashton did not feel very strong, and the sympathy of King's Crofton was very great. Paul went on his way quietly, only, the deed of partnership between himself and Basil Verity being duly signed, the old firm was Verity and Ashton now.

The junior partner drove over to Woodcote one day to take Lord Wilmhurst some message from Mr. Castleton; a letter would have done as well, but Paul had rather a fancy to see more of the pleasant young nobleman, and discover whether the Earl's resemblance to himself was as striking as he had thought it at their first meeting.

Lord Wilmhurst was in the grounds; Paul was ushered into the drawing-room while a servant went in search of him.

At first he thought the beautiful room was empty, then a girl rose from a low chair by the fire, a sweet-faced, dainty creature, with large star-like blue eyes, which fixed themselves on Paul with a troubled expression.

"I fear I have startled you," he said gently; "the servant asked me to wait here while the Earl was sent for. I have brought him a business message from our client, Mr. Castleton."

"Then you are Mr. Verity?"

"No, I am Paul Ashton, at your service; and I hope you will excuse my having disturbed you."

"Indeed, you did not disturb me. I was only startled"—she blushed—"at your strange resemblance to Lord Wilmhurst."

"Then you notice it, too. I confess it has puzzled me."

"No one could help noticing it. You are graver and a little taller, but—"

"Your brother told me I was his double."

"I think Lord Wilmhurst was quite right, but I am not his sister. My father is Vicar of Dene, and Lady Maria brought me here because I wanted a change. My name is Lorraine."

The last vestige of constraint had broken down when the Earl appeared. Dolly made some excuse and left the gentlemen together.

The message delivered, Paul would have taken his leave, but Lord Wilmhurst pressed him to remain.

"I should like you to meet my aunt. We shall be having tea directly—stay and take a cup. I want to see if Lady Maria remarks on our extraordinary likeness."

Paul smiled.

"I fancy it puzzles many people. I've had two or three greetings from utter strangers lately, who questioned me about the hounds and the meet as though I must be *au fait* on all hunting matters."

"I suppose you don't come from Australia, Mr. Ashton?"

"Oh, no," replied Paul much surprised.

"An uncle of mine went out there years ago, and I wondered if you could be one of his descendants."

"I am a born Londoner," said Paul simply; "and was never out of England in my life. As to relations, both my parents were only children; so you will see I can't have many. My mother and sister live with me in King's Crofton."

Enter a servant with tea and lamps. The beautiful old room was radiant with light when Lady Maria came in, and was presented by her nephew to his double.

The old lady looked long and searchingly at Paul, but she declared she did not see much likeness to the Earl.

"Just a slight resemblance, perhaps, but no more. Do I understand you are living in this neighbourhood, Mr. Ashton?"

"I have just settled here."

"He's a partner of Mr. Castleton's solicitor," put in Lord Wilmhurst; "and will flourish in time into that important person, a confidential lawyer, who knows the secret skeleton of every family for miles round. Yours must be an interesting profession, Mr. Ashton."

"I am very fond of it," answered Paul, his beautiful eyes lighting up with animation.

Lady Maria looked at him keenly.

"Perhaps your father was a lawyer, Mr. Ashton. I believe professions, like talents, are often hereditary?"

The young man grew very pale, one would almost have said the remark gave him pain, and his answer was prompt and almost defiant.

"My father was an artist, Lady Maria, and as I can't even copy a simple drawing, and have not the least eye for colour, I can't agree with you as to your views of heredity."

My Lady waxed more gracious after that, and Dolly Lorraine came in to pour out the tea.

Paul Ashton spent a very pleasant half-hour in the Woodcote drawing-room, and (much to her nephew's amazement) when he rose to go Lady Maria pressed him warmly to come again.

"You will always be welcome, Mr. Ashton, while we are at Woodcote, and I hope you will find your way here often."

"Aunt Maria," said the Earl, when their guest had departed, "I do believe you have taken a fancy to young Ashton."

"I haven't," said Lady Maria, who was rather given to contradiction; "but I am sorry for him."

"He has a nice face," said Dolly.

"Thank you," put in the Earl; "I take that as a compliment to myself, seeing his likeness to me. Now, Aunt Maria, why are you sorry for Ashton? he's got a very good billet at King's Crofton, and from what I have heard of him is sure to get on."

The old lady's face softened strangely.

"He is like you, Noel, though I would not admit it before him; but it is a sad likeness, it's as though you had taken all the sunshine and he all the shade."

Paul only got home just in time for dinner. He had suggested to his mother those dreary late dinners might well be given up and replaced by a high tea, but Mrs. Ashton would not hear of anything that looked like retrenchment. It seemed that her temper grew more and more trying now she was in delicate health, and there were times when Paul felt the poorest lodging, and peace and quietness, would have been more like home to him than Glen Rosa.

Nothing that he could do was right. Mrs. Ashton reproached him if he was out; and if he stayed at home declared his silence was depressing. It was a positive relief to the poor fellow when

it was time for him to start for his office. Over and over again a temptation seized him to leave his womenkind to shift for themselves, and enjoy a little freedom, but he bore up bravely, and never breathed a word to any human creature of his home troubles.

This particular evening everything went wrong. Mrs. Ashton had expected friends to afternoon tea and been disappointed. A bill had come in for some of Milly's toilettes much larger than she had expected it to be. Milly herself had one of the fits of depression to which she was subject, and, in short, when they sat down to dinner Paul felt the moral atmosphere was heavy with coming storms.

"I can't think where you have been," said Mrs. Ashton, peevishly, when the neat housemaid had retired. "The office closes at six, and yet you never by any chance come home till seven. You never come here except to sleep and eat."

Paul sighed.

"As it happens, mother, I left the office quite early to-day, but I had to go to Woodcote with a message to Lord Wilmhurst. He pressed me to stay to tea, and as you are always telling me I neglect my social duties, I thought you would commend me for doing so."

"Lord Wilmhurst!" repeated Mrs. Ashton, jealously, for King's Crofton was not above gossip, and she had heard all about the young Earl. "Of course you ought to cultivate him. Why, he has ten thousand a-year, and a splendid place in Kent."

"He's a very pleasant, friendly young man," replied Paul, "and I took a great fancy to him."

"I hope you asked him here!" said the mother, anxiously. "He is a most eligible *parti*, and having no parents, can please himself in his choice of a wife."

She glanced at her daughter as she spoke, and Paul quite understood the meaning of her words, but he would not notice them and tried to answer lightly.

"I assure you the Earl is well looked after, mother. He has a maiden aunt who presides over his house, and would certainly do her best to protect him against all poverty-stricken young ladies."

"Did you see her?"

"Yes, and she was very gracious to me, asking me to come again. A very handsome old lady, but, depend upon it, mother, Lady Maria Dene—"

He stopped abruptly. Mrs. Ashton had let drop the claret glass she was just raising to her lips. The glass fell in fragments to the ground, and the wine poured down her dress in a rich dark stream. She seemed utterly unconscious of the accident, she was leaning back in her chair with a white strained face and dull heavy eyes.

In a moment Paul was at her side.

"You are not well, mother. Let me take you upstairs to lie down."

But Mrs. Ashton recovered her self-possession by an effort and pushed him impatiently away.

"I am perfectly well, Paul. My hands are cold. I suppose that is why I let the glass fall. Go back to your seat and tell me all about your visit. It's well to be you associating with lords and ladies."

Paul finished his little story, but he was uneasy about his mother. She only toyed with her dinner, and barely tasted anything; she seemed interested in the people at Woodcote, especially in Lady Maria Dene, making her son describe the old lady fully.

"I shall be an old lady myself some day," she said, lightly, "so I may as well hear all about her. Has she lived with her nephew long?"

"Always, I believe. Lady Wilmhurst died at his birth, and his father was always a wanderer afterwards, never settling down until he died from an accident some years later. It is no wonder Lady Maria seems so wrapped up in her nephew for she has taken the place of both his parents."

"And she thought you like the Earl?"

"I believe she rather resented the likeness, thinking it a sort of liberty on my part. I should like you to see Lord Wilmhurst, mother, and hear whether you think I am his double."

But the next day all Mrs. Ashton's interest in the subject had disappeared; she had a nervous headache, and hardly spoke at all during breakfast. When Paul came home to lunch to his bewilderment he found his mother and sister had gone to London.

"They'll be home to dinner, sir," explained the servant. "The mistress ordered a fly to meet the six-twenty train. She said she should be too tired to walk."

If Paul could have followed his mother and Mildred he would have been not a little astonished at their doings. Mrs. Ashton went to Kilburn, where she had several acquaintances, and leaving Milly to spend a few hours with one of these, she herself hired a cab and drove to the West-end. Here, at a large stationer's, a reading-room well stored with papers and reference books, was open to the public for the fee of a penny. Mrs. Ashton devoted her attention to the peerage, and, oddly enough, seemed most interested in that page of it which chronicled the name and honours of the Earl of Wilmhurst.

Rapidly she ran her eye down the short paragraph and discovered that the present peer was thirty and unmarried (this she knew before), also that he came to the title at the age of five, and his heir presumptive was his cousin, Theodore Dene, of Melbourne, Australia.

Mrs. Ashton closed the book with a jerk.

"I was not mistaken then," she muttered, feverishly. "To think of it. One word from me and that young man in Australia would have to give up all hope of his inheritance. Oh, I was a fool to be taken in by that woman years ago. Seven hundred a year, indeed, why I ought to have had two thousand at the very least. And now shall I speak or not—better not, if Paul knew all he would be sure to marry, and then Mildred would indeed be lonely and neglected when I have to leave her."

CHAPTER IV.

LORD WILMHURST did not go home for Christmas. His aunt caught a feverish cold, and the King's Crofton doctor declared it would be dangerous for her to travel in such bitter weather, so a liberal cheque was sent to Mr. Lorraine, with the request that he would see the Castle charities were distributed as usual, and Woodcote did not lose its tenants.

They spent Christmas very pleasantly. Lady Maria, seeing what good friends Noel and Dorothy had become, began once more to indulge her favourite hope of a marriage between them.

A hard frost deprived the Earl of his hunting, and he had to fall back on skating as a pastime. There was an ornamental lake in the grounds of Woodcote, which was reputed to have the best ice for miles round. Mr. Castleton had always thrown it open to the public, merely directing the lodge-keepers to require the name or visiting-card of any one they admitted; and Lord Wilmhurst, much to his aunt's disgust, continued the practice.

"We should be the best-hated people in the county if we refused," he told Lady Maria. "Why, all the King's Crofton people come up here as a matter of course."

Lady Maria shrugged her shoulders.

"You are as bad as a Radical, Noel."

"No, I'm not. There's no occasion for you to know these people, Aunt Maria; but I can't deprive them of their favourite amusement just because their names don't appear in Burke's 'Landed Gentry.'"

Lady Maria shrugged her shoulders.

"I think you might have some regard for Dorothy."

He smiled kindly at the girl.

"I don't believe Miss Lorraine will enjoy her skating a bit less because a score or so of respectable people share the pleasure. I'll be as careful and discreet as the most wary of chaperons, Aunt Maria, and not introduce any one to her."

Lady Maria gave way. She would have yielded to anything which brought those two together. She promised to walk down to the

lake presently and see how they were getting on, and watched Dolly go off with her nephew, reflecting they made as handsome a couple as eye could wish to rest upon.

"I wish Aunt Maria were not so proud," said Wilmhurst, with a sigh. "I should have liked to ask every one up to the house for tea, but I daren't. She'd be desperately polite, no doubt; but, I'm sure, she'd freeze the poor things by her manner."

Dolly smiled.

"And yet, how kind she is to some people."

"Her heart's in the right place, but there's such an awful crust of pride and etiquette to pierce through before you get to it. She hasn't your mother's gift of making every one happy."

"There's no one like mother," said Dolly naïvely.

"I shouldn't wonder but what you'd be like her some day," returned Noel, looking with admiration at the sweet, girlish face. "I say, Dorothy, if Ashton's on the ice you'll speak to him, won't you? I shouldn't like him to feel snubbed. And then there'll be the Verities. I'm very much taken with them. You won't be offended if I introduce you?"

Dolly laughed outright.

"I should be very sorry if you didn't. I think Sir Isaac's just the picture of an old English gentleman. And, you know, Lord Wilmhurst, we're not grand people at home. We can't be as proud and exclusive as Lady Maria."

The result of this conversation was that, when Paul Ashton and his sister reached the lake, they found the Earl and Basil Verity cutting wonderful circles on the ice, while Miss Lorraine walked briskly up and down with Sir Isaac.

The old gentleman shook hands with his favourite at once.

"I'm glad to see you here, Mr. Ashton. I've just been telling my son-you stick too much to business. 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,' eh, Miss Mildred?"

"Paul is always dull," replied Mildred coldly. "He wouldn't have come this afternoon, only mother persuaded him. Paul," reprovingly, "why don't you introduce me to Miss Lorraine?"

Dolly, who felt for the young lawyer, and guessed why he had hesitated, made things easier for him by saying—

"I should like to know your sister, Mr. Ashton."

But, though after the introduction she shook hands with Milly and exchanged a few remarks with her, she was not at all favourably impressed by Paul's sister.

"Aren't you going to skate, Miss Lorraine?" asked Milly.

"Not just now. I have been on the ice nearly an hour, and I feel tired. I am going to talk to Sir Isaac if he will have me for a companion, and we can watch all you good people for amusement."

Lord Wilmhurst came up just then. Dolly herself introduced him to Miss Ashton (thereby saving Paul from a rebuke for his negligence), and perceived that young lady much preferred a companion of the sterner sex.

Very soon she was flying over the ice in the Earl's company.

Dolly hoped Lady Maria would not appear just yet, and then started to find Sir Isaac watching her with rather a perplexed face.

"Miss Ashton skates well," she remarked.

"Uncommonly well. She's a pretty creature, but I don't think she is equal to her brother."

"They are not at all alike."

"No; she's the image of her mother. Have you met Mrs. Ashton, Miss Lorraine?"

"No"—Dolly found herself blushing—"she called one day, but we were out, and Lady Maria does not care to make many acquaintances, as she is here for so short a time, so she only left cards."

Sir Isaac smiled grimly.

"I'm the only person in King's Crofton who doesn't appreciate Mrs. Ashton and her daughter. They are general favourites in our little town, while people vote Paul too proud and

cold; but I always tell my son his partner's worth the rest of the family put together."

"I like his face—but it is too sad."

"Well, I don't fancy he's a very happy home. Madam and Miss Mildred are just wrapped up in each other—that poor fellow can do nothing right."

Presently Basil Verity joined them with rather an annoyed expression. He seriously contemplated proposing to Mildred Ashton, though his father's strong aversion to the step had made him delay it so far; but it did not please him to see the open flirtation one whom he regarded as his own property was carrying on with the Earl.

He did not blame Lord Wilmhurst, he was not enough in love to be quite blind, and he could see that Mildred, to put it mildly, was throwing herself at his head; but the sight annoyed him, so he took off his skates and rejoined his father.

"It's a pretty scene," he remarked to Dorothy. "Later on, when the lake is lighted up, it will be prettier still. It was quite a public rejoicing when we heard Lord Wilmhurst meant to admit the townsfolk to the lake as usual. We've all come here so many years I'm afraid we've begun to look on it as a right."

"The Earl never thought of taking away that right," she said laughing. "He told Lady Maria he should be the best-hated man in Hertfordshire if he tried to."

"Is not her ladyship coming down to look at the skating?"

"She promised to be here by four. Ah!"—as she caught sight of a tall, stately figure in the distance—"here she comes; I must go and meet her."

She had joined Lady Maria, and was soon listening to the latter's excuse for her late arrival. Dolly, who did not fancy her old friend would enjoy the spectacle of Noel's attentions to Miss Ashton, had purposely detained her at a spot where the two were not visible.

She was saying it was getting too dark for skating, when a piercing shriek rang through the air.

Lady Maria and Dorothy turned involuntarily and hurried in the direction from which it came.

Basil Verity greeted them with a troubled face, and explained anxiously the ice had given way in the middle of the lake, and Lord Wilmhurst had lost his footing, falling into the water.

"It was Miss Ashton who screamed," he said gravely; "she was nearest to the Earl, and saw him fall. Ashton has plunged in after him, and as he is a good swimmer, there is every chance; but, of course, the blocks of ice floating about are terribly against him."

Lady Maria passed Mildred Ashton, now in violent hysterics, with a look of scorn, and strained her eyes to the centre of the lake where the struggle was going on. But a mist seemed to obscure her sight, and she could distinguish nothing. She leaned heavily on Dorothy's arm.

"Mr. Ashton will save him," breathed the girl. "Take courage, Lady Maria; all will yet be well."

But Lady Maria shivered with something like terror, and a bitter groan escaped her trembling lips.

"He will be killed!" she cried helplessly. "He is all I have in the world, and I must see him die before my eyes."

Sir Isaac Verity, who had a shrewd suspicion Mildred Ashton had been the cause of the accident by diverting the Earl's attention when he was approaching the dangerous part of the water, had scant pity for hysterical women, so deciding sharply that whatever happened to the two young men, the excited girl would only be a hindrance to the others, he quietly asked a friend of his, whose carriage was waiting at the Lodge, if she would take Mildred home, and explain to Mrs. Ashton what had happened.

So, before the men returned with the ropes that had been sent for, Mildred was led, still weeping hysterically, to Mrs. Johnson's brougham, and driven away from the scene of the accident.

The two dripping figures had risen for the third time when the gardeners managed to pass the strong ropes round Paul Ashton's wrist, and so drag him, still clutching the Earl with frantic grasp, safe to land.

The two figures were separated with difficulty. Both seemed absolutely lifeless; but Dr. Galpin, the leading medical man of King's Crofton, was happily among the skaters, and he declared there was hope still if they were carried quickly into shelter and restoratives applied.

No one so much as asked Lady Maria's permission to take the young lawyer to Woodcote. "No doubt they thought, apart from common humanity, she was bound to do all she could for Paul since he had risked his life for her nephew's."

The eager skaters dispersed. A knot stood on the terrace steps waiting eagerly for tidings of the two so nearly drowned; but the ice itself was totally deserted—people could not bear to skate over its smooth surface knowing the tragedy it had caused.

Dr. Galpin had had the two rescued from the water carried into a room on the ground floor called the study. A large fire burnt in the grate. The two still forms were laid perfectly flat on the long, oaken table, and then the task of trying to restore them began, the housekeeper and Hilton being valuable assistants to the doctor, while Lady Maria, in speechless grief, paced up and down her own sitting-room, unable to look on the still, death-like features of her idolized nephew, and seemingly aged ten years by the agony of the last hour.

Dorothy Lorraine would gladly have been with her, but my lady had locked the door on herself and her sorrow, and poor Dolly could only wait about anxiously for the doctor's verdict.

"He's not given up hope yet," said Hilton, passing out of the study in search of something needed by the doctor, and coming on the little forlorn figure. "Miss Dorothy, dear, you'll be downright ill if you stay here in the cold. Do go into the drawing-room, there's a nice fire there, and you're pretty well perished."

Dolly obeyed. Poor child, she was so bewildered it was almost a comfort to be told what to do. To her surprise old Sir Isaac Verity was standing on the hearthrug. He took her hand and led her gently to a seat.

"Dr. Galpin has still hope," he said, kindly. "My dear young lady, this is a terrible time for you."

"I have known Lord Wilmhurst all my life," she answered; "if he dies it will be almost like losing a brother of my own."

Sir Isaac had too much tact to tell her that, and all King's Crofton had regarded her as something dearer than a sister to the young Earl, that his condolences had been addressed to one he believed the future Lady Wilmhurst. His voice was just as kind, his tone quite as full of sympathy now he knew his mistake.

"I trust he will not die; and you must try and take something or you will be too ill to be of any use by and by. I am waiting partly to see if I can be of any help to Lady Maria, and partly on poor Ashton's account. Let me ring for some tea, you look perfectly worn out."

But Hilton had given a message in the kitchen, and tea was brought in even then by one of the Woodcote servants, a native of King's Crofton, who knew Sir Isaac well.

"Try and persuade the young lady to take something, sir," she pleaded, and Dorothy, more to avoid argument, let them pour her out a cup of hot tea, and felt revived when she had swallowed it.

It was terrible, sitting there, waiting for tidings. Sir Isaac began to talk. He thought anything was better for Dorothy than that awful blank silence.

"I trust Lord Wilmhurst may recover," he said, very gravely, "not only for his own sake and his aunt's, but for that poor girl's. If he dies she must feel herself almost his murderer."

"I don't understand," said Dolly, faintly. "I did not see how the accident happened. I heard Miss Ashton scream. What had she to do with it?"

Sir Isaac explained a small part of the lake towards the centre was not considered safe, and a red flag had been hoisted on a stick to warn skaters from the dangerous point.

Mildred Ashton, partly from girlish vanity, perhaps to show how devoted were the young

Earl's attentions to her, had tossed her muff towards the stick.

Finding it caught on the top she had clapped her hands, and told Lord Wilmhurst she was sure he would fetch it for her. She could not possibly walk home without it, she would be frozen.

Dorothy looked horrified.

"No wonder she went into hysterics. Her anxiety must be frightful. Two lives jeopardised by her vanity, Lord Wilmhurst's and her own brother's."

"I am afraid Mildred Ashton is a confirmed flirt," said Sir Isaac, sadly. "She would do anything, run any risks to gain a man's attention, and of course an Earl's notice was more valuable to her than a commoner's."

"Did Mr. Ashton know it?" asked Dorothy. "Do you think he went to Lord Wilmhurst's rescue on that account?"

"I can't say. I haven't known Paul Ashton long, but I am very fond of him. I believe he would risk his life any day for a friend's."

"Where is she—his sister?"

Sir Isaac smiled a little bitterly.

"I sent her home. I felt whatever happened she was better there. I shall call at Glen Rosa on my way home with the doctor's report of Ashton. That's what I'm waiting for."

And the report came then. Hilton brought it in with streaming eyes. Her master had opened his eyes and spoken once. Mr. Ashton was conscious but terribly exhausted.

Dorothy took the good news to Lady Maria, the one word "hope" unlocking that fast-closed door. The old lady looked at her young friend searchingly.

"You are not deceiving me, Dolly?"

"I never deceived anyone in my life, Lady Maria. Dr. Galpin thinks the Earl will do well. He is still anxious about Mr. Ashton, who seems terribly exhausted. Of course," added the girl, gently, "you won't mind his staying here since he risked his own life for Lord Wilmhurst's."

"I should like him to stay," said Lady Maria, in a strange, far-off sort of voice, "but I can't see his mother. You mustn't ask me to. If she wants to come and nurse her son I dare say the servants will make her comfortable, but I can't see her."

CHAPTER V.

MRS. JOHNSON was the mother of grown-up daughters. She had seen a good deal of other girls besides her own, but she had never in her life witnessed such utter want of self-control as was manifested by Mildred Ashton on the drive from Woodcote to the London-road.

"Elsie," she said, to her eldest daughter, who was with her, "tell Dobbs to stop at Dr. Galpin's surgery. I know he is at Woodcote, but his partner may be in and I am getting anxious."

She spoke in a low tone, and Elsie, who was very intelligent, guessed she did not want Miss Ashton to overhear her.

She pulled the check-string, alighted, and gave the order to the coachman. It was dark now, and Mildred did not notice that instead of turning into the London-road they went down High-street.

She lay back utterly exhausted by the violent emotion she had undergone. Quiet at last, there was still something unnatural about her face. Her eyes had a wild feverish glitter, and the pupils moved continually as though she had no power over them.

Elsie Johnson began to think with her mother this was no common attack of hysterics. It was a relief to her when the carriage drew up at the surgery, and they found Mr. Leslie, Dr. Galpin's partner, at liberty.

"You must get out here, Mildred," said Mrs. Johnson, gently. "I want to speak to the doctor."

Mildred obeyed half-sullenly. She made no answer, but she suffered Elsie to assist her to alight, and then followed the others into the warm, comfortable surgery.

Very simply Mrs. Johnson explained the accident to Mr. Leslie, and the strange effect it

had had on her young friend. She had purposely drawn the surgeon out of earshot of the two girls.

"Mrs. Ashton is, as you know, far from well. I perfectly dread the effect on her if Mildred has another attack at home."

"I always thought Miss Ashton hysterical," he said, gravely, "do you mean this was not an ordinary attack?"

"I never saw one like it. When we drove out of Woodcote she was positively raving. Elsie and I had to hold her hands, or I believe she would have thrown herself out of the carriage. Then her mood changed and she began singing. I assure you, Mr. Leslie, I never went through such an experience in my life. I drew the blinds down and hoped no one would recognize my carriage, for I am sure they must have thought I had a lunatic in it."

Mr. Leslie went up to Mildred.

"You have had a terrible fright, Miss Ashton. I will send you a little sedative medicine, and look in to see how you are in the morning."

"I shall not see you," said Mildred, sullenly. "Mother never lets me see anyone when my head's bad, and its awful now."

Mr. Leslie looked at Mrs. Johnson. His glance intimated Mrs. Ashton probably knew more than they did of her daughter's ailments. Aloud he said quietly.

"I will call on the chance. I shall be anxious to hear about your brother, too. I can assure you, Miss Ashton, we should all regret anything happening to him. He has won many friends during his short stay here."

Mildred shook her head.

"Paul doesn't matter. Mother says he can take care of himself, and we should do better without him. He only worries us."

It seemed as though some contrary spirit urged the girl now to speak the bald bare truth, which at other times she so skilfully concealed. It was to Mrs. Johnson as though the veneer of fashionable politeness had been rubbed off, and she saw Mildred's soul in its true character.

The lady was one of those King's Crofton matrons who had "taken up" Mrs. Ashton and Mildred warmly, while declaring they saw nothing whatever in Paul; it dawned on Mrs. Johnson slowly the young lawyer must have had a heavy burden to carry with his homeshared by such a girl as Mildred.

They found Basil Verity before them at Glen Rosa. He had already broken the news of Paul's danger to his mother and was surprised to find she seemed far more anxious about Mildred's absence than her son's peril.

"I am afraid Miss Ashton has been thoroughly upset," said Elsie Johnson, kindly. "Mr. Leslie promised to send her a sedative, and will come to see her in the morning."

Mrs. Ashton did not lose her self-command like her daughter. Her politeness never failed, her expressions of gratitude to the Johnsons were fervent; but, through it all the elder lady felt certain Mildred's mother resented that call at Mr. Leslie's surgery, and would not allow the surgeon to see her child if he called the next day.

"Are you going home, Mr. Verity?" asked Mrs. Johnson. "Can we take you?"

He accepted, and Mrs. Ashton's three visitors left together. The lawyer was an old friend of Mrs. Johnson; indeed there was a distant cousinship between them, so she was quite intimate enough to remark,—

"You look fagged out. I am afraid you are worrying over your partner, but he will have every care at Woodcote, and Sir Isaac told me he should not leave the house until he had heard the doctor's verdict."

"What a wonderful man my father is," was Basil's answer. "I never quite understood how clear his judgment was until to-day."

Mrs. Johnson knew the story of the muff, and that Mildred's vanity had sent Lord Wilmhurst into danger. She knew that that same vanity might yet cost two lives, and so she answered, gravely,—

"Yes. I always thought him prejudiced against Mildred Ashton until to-day. I have

heard him speak of her as a flirt, and it seemed to me cruelly unfair—but I see now he was right."

She was quite aware Sir Isaac had barely escaped having Miss Ashton for a daughter-in-law, but she made no allusion to that. She rather fancied from the expression on Basil Verity's face that all danger of his marrying Mildred was over.

"I hope Ashton will do well," breathed the lawyer so earnestly that it sounded almost like a prayer. "He's a quiet fellow, and we're not very close friends, but I never met a man I could trust more entirely."

"Do you know anything of these new people at Woodcote? Are they likely to take good care of Mr. Ashton, or will Lady Maria think it a liberty for a country lawyer to be lying insensible in her temporary home?"

"I don't know much of Lady Maria, but she is devoted to her nephew. I should say she would be grateful to Paul just for trying to save the Earl's life."

The accident happened on a Saturday. The following day at King's Crofton church prayers were offered for Noel Lord Wilmhurst and Paul Ashton, who were described as "dangerously ill."

Mr. Leslie called on Mrs. Johnson that Sunday afternoon. He found her alone. Her children were at church with their father. The young surgeon went straight to the point.

"I called at Glen Rosa to-day, but was not allowed to see Miss Ashton; her mother said she was asleep, and as she had had a very bad night, it was a pity to disturb her. She was much obliged to me for calling, but her daughter was not ill enough to require medical aid. She had been subject from a child to nervous headaches after any serious excitement."

Mrs. Johnson looked at the young surgeon very gravely.

"Mr. Leslie, I believe you have something more to tell me."

"I have. I have been asking myself all the morning whether it was fair to betray a woman's secret; but I think in this instance it is my duty. I believe you are tolerably intimate with Mr. Verity?"

"More than tolerably, we are close friends."

"Then he will take from you a warning that would be an impertinence from a mere stranger like myself, that is why I want to tell you Mrs. Ashton's secret; you can decide how much or how little you must tell to Basil Verity, only let it be enough to make him give up the thought of marrying his partner's sister."

"Well?"

"Before I came to King's Crofton two years ago, I had never been in private practice; all my engagements were as Resident or House Surgeon at Hospitals or Public Institutions."

Mrs. Johnson looked troubled, but did not interrupt him by a single question.

"The last twelve months before I came here I was assistant surgeon at a celebrated asylum in Berkshire; there were two hundred pauper patients, and about a dozen private ones, for whose support their friends paid handsomely, and who enjoyed—I must say—every comfort. Among these there was a Mr. Ashton who had been there many years. He was at all times hopelessly deranged but had intervals of violent mania, when he was so dangerous it took two men to prevent him doing himself or others an injury. Of course, as the assistant medical officer, I saw him often; I knew that his wife came twice a year to visit him. It never fell to my lot to receive her, poor thing, but I have seen her enter and leave the house; I have read a dozen letters from her. The moment the Ashtons settled at Glen Rosa, I knew the mother was the wife of my late patient, her face, her voice, her handwriting, I could swear to all three—and though I always think deceit wrong, there have been times when I have admired her indomitable pluck in hiding her miserable history from the world."

"And Mildred—"

"I would stake my professional reputation that Miss Ashton will one day become hopelessly insane. I believe she has intervals of derangement now."

Mrs. Johnson looked up at him with glistening eyes.

"I prayed for Paul Ashton's life to day, Mr. Leslie, but if this awful doom is to fall on him, it would surely be more merciful if he were taken now."

"He shows no signs of his father's malady, a sound mind in a healthy body would, I believe, describe Paul Ashton."

"But if the curse is in the family how can he escape? And he is not at all like his mother so he must take after his father."

"No; Keith Ashton is as dark as a mulatto; he bears no resemblance to Paul. Well," and the young doctor sighed from real pity, "we hear sad stories often enough, but I never felt more sorry for anyone than I do for Ashton."

"Do you think he knows?"

"I fancy so; I should say he knows his mother's deception, and objects to it. All King's Crofton declares Paul is never seen at any of the Glen Rosa festivities, he accepts no invitations, makes no friends. I expect, poor fellow, he can't bring himself to break his mother's heart by betraying her secret, but he realizes the doom that may fall on him, and so has begun already to lead a very self-contained life. He is not the man to marry, and risk carrying such a curse into another generation."

"And he is so good looking! When I saw him and the young Earl of Wilmhurst together, I thought Mr. Ashton the handsomer of the two."

CHAPTER VI.

DR. GALPIN spent the whole of Saturday night at Woodcote; the two sufferers had been removed from the study into two comfortable bedrooms on the first-floor, opening into each other.

Mrs. Walden, the housekeeper, had selected these rooms with a view to the convenience of doctor and nurse.

"Lady Maria's just distracted, sir," she told Dr. Galpin; "it's no use to go to her for directions; it stands to reason as that poor young gentleman's well nigh lost his life to save my lord's he must have the best care we can give him; it'll be handy for you to have them next door to each other, and as I mean to take the night turn myself, if the nurse you've telegraphed for don't come, it'll be handy for me, too."

The nurse did not come, and Mrs. Walden carried out her self-appointed task, Hilton relieved her at the first dawn of daylight, and when at nine o'clock on that terrible Sunday Dr. Galpin went downstairs to breakfast, he found Dorothy Lorraine waiting to pour out his coffee, white and sad, but quiet and composed.

"Lady Maria is too upset to come to breakfast," she said gravely; "Dr. Galpin, I am very anxious about her, she has never closed her eyes all night. I stayed with her, for I could not bear to leave her alone, and when she thought me asleep she paced up and down the room repeating that it was all her fault, and Lord Wilmhurst must die as a punishment for her sin. You know it must be a delusion, for she has been perfectly devoted to him always."

"I think you are no relation of the family, Miss Lorraine, but you doubtless know them well."

"I have known them all my life. My father and the late Earl were friends at college."

"And you consider there is no ground for Lady Maria's self-reproaches?"

"Ground!" cried Dolly indignantly. "Why, Dr. Galpin, she worships the Earl. I think she would have given her life for him anytime. Besides, Lady Maria is generally as calm and self-possessed as a statue. She goes about at Dene just like a queen among her subjects. I didn't think she could cry or seem excited till last night."

"I must go home now," said Dr. Galpin, when he had finished breakfast. "I have several patients to visit; but I will be back here early in the afternoon. Do you think Lady Maria would like to see me before I leave?"

But, face to face with Lady Maria, Dr. Galpin was as impressed by the change in her as Dolly could desire.

She looked so terribly broken and aged that the doctor felt quite touched. In vain he spoke hopefully to her, saying that though Lord Wilmhurst was not yet out of danger, and there was a terrible state of weakness, he trusted the patient's youth and good constitution would pull him through.

Lady Maria was as one who could not hope. Dr. Galpin almost doubted if she heard him, until she looked up suddenly and asked,—

"And the other—?"

"The other—," The Doctor felt perplexed at first. "Oh, you mean Mr. Ashton. I am very anxious about him; besides the weakness, he seems so terribly depressed, almost as though he didn't care whether he lived or died."

"And yet he is young—and successful."

Dr. Galpin was in his partner's confidence. Perhaps he was thinking of the incurable patient in the Berkshire lunatic asylum when he said gravely,—

"He is young, and successful in his profession; but he may have other troubles. Believe me, my dear lady, there are worse sorrows than old age or failure."

Lady Maria lifted her wan face to the doctor's. "I should like him to get better, Dr. Galpin. He risked his life for Noel's—I can never forget that. Please let everything be done for him—just as though he were my nephew."

Dr. Galpin went off to his expectant patients at King's Crofton. Dorothy stole up to her own room to write a long letter home, and tell her dear ones of the trouble overshadowing Woodcote.

Lady Maria hesitated a little, and then went down the long corridor, not to her nephew's sick-room, but to that occupied by Paul Ashton.

Sixty turned, she had yet seen very little of illness. Noel's father had died from an accident in the hunting field. He had ridden out in the morning hale and strong, to be carried home at noon quite dead.

Noel himself had had a wonderful immunity from all the diseases supposed to haunt childhood and early youth, so Lady Maria had never had to fill the rôle of nurse. She had never been in the house with serious sickness till now.

She opened the door of Paul's room noiselessly and walked in. She had discarded her usual silk attire, and wore a soft, non-rustling black cashmere, which clung to her and made no sound as she advanced towards the bed.

Mrs. Walden had gone to seek a little much-needed rest. Hilton was with the Earl, so that Paul was perfectly alone. He was awake and conscious; his beautiful eyes were wide open and fixed on the bright wood fire. There was no expectancy or anxiety on his pale, wan face; he did not show the least surprise when he saw Lady Maria.

She drew a chair close to the side of the bed and sat down.

"I have come to thank you," she said quietly. "The doctor has hopes of Noel; and if my boy recovers I shall owe his life to you."

Paul shook his head.

"I did very little."

"You must not talk," commanded Lady Maria, with a return of her usual imperious manner; "it's bad for you. I've come here because Dr. Galpin says you're in bad spirits. It's wrong of you, very wrong—a young man like you ought to be as cheerful as possible. Do you feel being away from your friends? You are much too ill to be moved; but I'll send for your mother if you like, and make her welcome when she comes."

Paul shook his head; he was too weak to talk much.

"You don't want her?"

Lady Maria's sharp, bead-like eyes were fixed full on the sick man's face.

"Then what is it you're worrying about? Dr. Galpin says you are not trying to get well. I told him 'Nonsense, you were young and successful; of course, you valued life the same as other people.' He told me you had something on your mind; so I came up here to see what I could do."

"You are very kind."

"No, I'm not," cried Lady Maria bitterly; "that's the last thing you ought to call me. I'm

a proud, disagreeable old woman; but I love Noel dearly, and it seems he'd have lost his life but for you—so I'd like to do something to make you feel brighter."

Paul shook his head sadly.

"Only death can free me from my trouble, Lady Maria—if it were not cowardly, I should pray to die."

"Fiddle-de-dee," returned my lady brusquely. "I expect you are making a tremendous mistake. I never meant to speak to you on the subject, but Dr. Galpin will have it you're fretting over something in secret, and I don't want your death to lie at my door; so I will mention what I had hoped never to speak of while I lived. Are you worrying about your father?"

Paul thought Lady Maria must be a magician; the answer of his feverish eye told her as plainly as any words that she had guessed the truth.

"Well," said my lady bluntly, "you need not worry any more. Your father had his faults—most men have—but he never did a thing which could make you ashamed of being his son."

"Did you know him?" asked Paul, much bewildered.

"Know him?" repeated Lady Maria, "aye, that I did. When they brought his poor mangled body home after the accident that killed him, I felt as though the sunshine had gone out of my life."

But excitement gave Paul a strange, fitful strength. He actually raised himself in bed and clasped Lady Maria's hand with feverish energy.

"Tell me," he panted, "is it true?—what am I to believe?—My mother says my father, Keith Ashton, is in a lunatic asylum, hopelessly insane."

"Then she's a wicked woman," returned Lady Maria grimly. "Lie down quietly, and I'll tell you the true story. It's painful for me, seeing it's the tale of my own sin, but there's nothing in it to make you fret."

"Your mother was a rustic beauty, and my brother, the last Lord Wilmhurst, Noel's father, married her privately within two years of his first wife's death. 'She never knew his rank—I doubt if she knows it now. On his travels he always called himself 'Mr. Dene,' and as 'Mr. Dene' he married her; but the marriage was as legal as marriage could be, and you are my nephew just as truly as my dear boy, Noel.'

Paul Ashton lay still, a strange smile on his face.

"If you could know," he breathed, "what I have suffered ever since I discovered my mother was not a widow, and that her husband was insane! The curse had been in his family for generations. I have felt it would surely descend to me. Don't you understand? I didn't want to get better. Death was more welcome to me than a lunatic asylum."

"I understand this," said Lady Maria doggedly—"that you'll talk yourself into a fever if you go on like this, and Dr. Galpin will blame me. Why can't you keep quiet?"

Then came a long, long pause, broken at last by the old lady.

"Ever since I saw you here I guessed who you must be, but the name Ashton puzzled me. At last I met your mother in the street, and recognized her. I knew the truth then—she had married again and given you her second husband's name. I had a hard struggle with myself whether I should speak out then, but there seemed no need. Every one spoke of you as devoted to your profession, and likely to succeed in it. I wanted to hide the truth, for Noel's sake. I sinned long ago for love of him, but he is too generous to forgive the wrong because he benefited by it—but the whole must come out now, in justice to you."

Paul smiled brightly.

"I want no public acknowledgment, Lady Maria," he said gravely. "Whether I am Paul Ashton or the Honourable Paul Dene, I care nothing. You have given me new life by telling me I am not a madman's son. I can face the future hopefully now. I want no more."

"I expect you'll have to take a great deal more," said Lady Maria severely, "but I'll finish my story. Lord Wilmhurst and your mother parted within a year of their marriage. He dis-

covered she had been engaged to a poorer lover, whom she flung over when the rich Mr. Dene began to pay her attentions. My brother was a jealous, passionate man, and resented his wife's treachery. He agreed to make her an allowance, and left her for ever. He made a will later, bequeathing fifty thousand pounds, all the money he could alienate from the title to me. In his desk was a private letter, telling me of his second marriage and the birth of his younger son. His wife, he declared, deserved nothing from him, but he wished to provide for the boy. He left every detail to me, only stipulating that his widow was to have no power at all to spend the principal.

"I went to see your mother. It is five-and-twenty years ago, and I was a younger woman than I am now. I told her her husband was dead, and wished me to do something for her. I did not take to her; it was not likely I should. My one desire was to break off all connection with her. I asked her what income would be sufficient for her wants. She said five hundred a year. I purchased her an annuity of seven hundred pounds, and from that day to this I have never heard of her.

"I never meant to steal the money: the fifty thousand pounds my brother wished to be yours. I did not want it for myself, but I was angry at his leaving so much away from Noel. I have never touched a penny of what remained after purchasing your mother's annuity. It has been in the funds ever since. As soon as I can leave Noel and go to see my lawyer I will have it re-invested in your name."

Paul Ashton shook his head.

"I shall never take it," he said gently. "Aunt Maria—let me call you so just this once—I should be as loth to rob Noel as you could be. I want no money, no title, no grandeur. You have given me what is worth more than all these—hope."

He looked so like Noel, as he lay there, that Lady Maria forgot he was the son of the woman she hated, and bending over the pillow, she kissed his forehead. Her eyes were not dry when she went out of Paul's room, but her heart was lighter than it had been for five-and-twenty years.

CHAPTER VII. AND LAST.

KING'S CROFTON had hardly recovered from the excitement of the accident on the lake at Woodcote; the kindly townfolk had hardly given up their anxiety to read the daily bulletins of the two invalids, when they had something fresh to talk about; a tragedy, so terribly sudden, so completely unexpected, that it completely engrossed public attention and general sympathy.

Mildred Ashton had not been seen in society since her brother's accident, but this excited little comment, as, though no one regarded her as a very devoted sister, still she was not expected to go in for pleasure while Paul hovered between life and death.

Enquiring friends at Glen Rosa were always told by the housemaid—"Missus was too upset to see anyone," so general anxiety had centred on Mrs. Ashton, and Mildred was supposed to be dutifully nursing her.

And it came as a thunderbolt to the whole community when one day, about a fortnight after the accident at Woodcote, the news came that Miss Ashton was dead.

She had fallen from a window on the second floor, and before she reached the ground all was over.

Alas! the inquest revealed the truth; Mildred had been excited and depressed, her mother had shut herself up with her, and never left her day or night.

Mrs. Ashton had only gone to the door to give some directions to a servant, when Mildred flung up the window-sash and leaped out, almost under the eyes, so to say, of her distracted mother.

A verdict of suicide during temporary insanity was mercifully recorded, for Mr. Leslie came forward to testify he had known Miss Ashton's father as a confirmed lunatic.

There was great pity expressed for the be-

reaved mother, and much wonder in certain quarters whether Basil Verity would not insist on dissolving his partnership with Paul Ashton—it was not pleasant to be associated with a man who might become insane at any moment, declared the gossip.

Sir Isaac silenced rumour pretty sharply. Until Paul Ashton was perfectly restored to health it was desirable to hide from him the recent terrible event. For his own part, the knight declared he would trust his son's partner to be as sane as any man in King's Crofton; but, of course, it was no concern of his—Basil must please himself.

And Mrs. Ashton—will it be believed—held her tongue. A word from her, and the whole of King's Crofton would have known Paul had not one drop of Ashton blood in his veins—but she would not speak it.

She had never loved her first husband; she had simply hated him when he found out her deceit and left her; and she hated Paul for his likeness to his father, and because he was safe from the doom she felt certain would fall on her favourite child.

She loved Keith Ashton with every fibre of her heart. For years she supported him in ease, bearing with a temper always akin to mania in its paroxysms. Later on, she spent well nigh half her income on his comfort, and never grudged it. And now, when all was over, when Mildred's fate was known to all the world, and people naturally suspected Paul of sharing his sister's madness, she would not deceive them.

"His father's people have taken him up," she said to herself savagely, "but they won't go so far as to acknowledge him. He'll never know but what he shares the Ashton curse, and I'm glad of it. Why should he be rich and prosperous while my poor Milly is cut off in her girlhood?"

But Mrs. Ashton had calculated amiss. Lady Maria was a proud woman, but she had some generosity in her nature. The moment she heard of Mildred Ashton's suicide her resolution was taken. Her brother's second marriage should be published to all the world, and Paul acknowledged as Noel's heir presumptive.

If "that woman" (Lady Maria's description of her sister-in-law) chose to call herself Lady Wilmhurst, why it could not be helped, but justice must be done to Paul.

The young Earl and Dorothy, whom she consulted as soon as the former was able to come downstairs, quite agreed with Lady Maria. Noel told her affectionately she must not fret over her share in the past. His brother was a brave fellow, and could not have been a nobler one had he been brought up at the Castle.

As for Dolly, she took such unfeigned interest in the story, and cried so heartily over Paul's burden, that Lady Maria began to think her old desire would be fulfilled in a new fashion, and pretty Dorothy be her niece after all, though not Noel's bride.

Basil Verity was called into the conclave, and his hearty common sense suggested a course which spared alike Lady Maria and Paul's mother from public censure.

He declared there was no occasion to publish to the world that the late Lord Wilmhurst had told his sister of his second marriage; it would be quite enough for outsiders to know that, struck by young Ashton's striking resemblance to her nephew Noel, Lady Maria had made inquiries into his parentage, and discovered that he was his mother's son by her first marriage with an artist, Geoffrey Dene. Plenty of people could be brought forward to testify that the late Earl had always travelled as "Geoffrey Dene," and it would surely be possible to find someone who could identify him with the "Mr. Dene" who had married Susan Brook at the little village church of Keesterton. Anyway the story must be a nine days' wonder; but by this course a great deal of pain might be spared, and Paul's identity would be proved beyond a doubt.

(Continued on page 285.)

PLANTS grow faster between four and six a.m. than at any other time during the day.

FOR EVER AND A DAY.

—101—

CHAPTER XV.

CUTHBERT DENISON returned to town in a state of mental excitement, such as had never visited him in the whole of his life before. It was an acute relief when he had parted from Jocelyn and found himself alone in a railway carriage of the express train that bore him swiftly from Yelverton to London.

Sitting back in a corner of this carriage, with lips firmly set and knit brows, Cuthbert gave himself up to the task of comprehending and solving the problem which fate had so unexpectedly put before him.

The more he thought, the more certain did he become that the inscription in that old prayer-book was likely to prove the biggest weapon with which his venomous hate and jealousy could desire to strike down his cousin Jocelyn.

The fact, thus suddenly brought to his knowledge, had the power of instantly changing the whole of Cuthbert's future. It was not necessary for him to dive very much farther into the truth of things, to question whether this previous marriage could be proved in any detrimental sense to Jocelyn Gretton.

Sufficient to Cuthbert was the fact that such a marriage had existed; it would go very hard, indeed, with him, he said to himself, with savage exultation, if he did not manage by every means in his power, to force his cousin, the man he had always detested, into a very quagmire of doubt, disaster and humiliation.

Cuthbert's first action on reaching London, was to hail a hansom and to drive to his mother's house. He did not live with his mother; he had not any real tenderness or sympathy with her. All he could do for her, as far as money was concerned, he did.

He was not an extravagant or a generous man, but he had a sort of satisfaction in keeping his mother's home comfortable, not to say luxurious. He paid her regular visits and would drive up in his private hansom, arousing the deepest interest in the brats of the neighbours who resided in the same road out of the Kensington-broad-street, and who knew very well the career of the able and rising young barrister.

Mrs. Denison was still in her room when her son arrived. She always believed herself to be a great invalid, and her life was passed in taking care of herself, and in receiving the visits of the odds and ends of people who kept up a sort of friendship with her.

Cuthbert never encouraged any great intimacy between his mother and his own friends. Quantities of these latter came and left cards on Mrs. Denison, but she was always too unwell to see them.

The fact was, as has been said before, Cuthbert though exceedingly proud of his mother's birth, had no pride for his mother herself. She was just the sort of woman who annoyed him; she had no brains; she lacked all artistic sense, she could do nothing but talk of her ailments and repine over her past folly and over her brother's harsh conduct to her.

Cuthbert knew by this time how much value could be abstracted from his mother, and he used her very cleverly, demanding nothing from her in return for his lavish attention to her wants, except absolute obedience to his wishes.

Mrs. Denison's obedience was unquestioning. She was very much in awe of her son, and her selfish nature required nothing, so long as her material comforts were supplied to her. This unexpected arrival of Cuthbert threw her into a flutter; she told her maid to admit Mr. Denison to her room.

The blinds were drawn, and a scent of lavender water permeated the atmosphere of this room. Cuthbert almost groped his way to his mother's bed side.

He listened to her querulous voice in silence for a moment, then broke in, curtly,—

"Tell your maid to pull up these blinds, and then to leave us," he said.

The order was given, and Mrs. Denison's faded

prettiness, decorated in expensive cambrics and laces, was exposed to view.

"My eyes are so weak from my last neuralgic attack," she murmured, apologetically.

Cuthbert made no answer of sympathy. As soon as the maid had gone, he rose and walked about the room, and his mother regarded him a little nervously.

She gave a start when he halted suddenly and addressed her with a question.

"Mother," he said, "can you remember anything very clearly about my uncle's wife. You knew her, I suppose?"

A curious expression swept for an instant over Celia Denison's faded face.

"I knew her well," she answered, immediately.

Cuthbert, looking intently at his mother, was at no loss to understand the meaning of that swift expression. He knew the whole construction of such a nature as his mother possessed.

He sat down and folded his arms.

"You liked her?" was his next query.

Never before had the young man seen such a look as now flashed into Celia Denison's face. The eyes flashed and the cheeks flushed for one instant.

Cuthbert had a glimpse of that prettiness for which his mother had been so famous, and which she strove so hard to preserve still.

By the quiver that ran through her frame, by the convulsive action of her fingers, by that look on her face, Cuthbert realized that there was, at least, one chord of sympathy between his mother and himself—the sympathy of hate.

"You liked her, mother?" he asked, repeating his question slowly.

Mrs. Denison's voice was full of spiteful intensity.

"I detested her," she answered; "before she came to Yelverton, Noel was everything that was nice to me; but after his marriage—" and here Mrs. Denison paused; "it was all through Marie I did what I did," she said, with that sort of eager spite, in accusing another to shield herself, that is a common fault of childhood, "she made my life so unhappy; she set my brother against me; I can't bear to talk of her even now, Cuthbert; she was such a horrid woman."

Cuthbert's lip curled in a faint sneer.

He knew exactly how to translate all this; he had no need of any unprejudiced witness to tell him that Lady Gretton had been one of the gentlest, and most lovely of women.

The reverence and the intensity of his uncle's grief would have revealed that, if he had not already heard it from others.

He could easily comprehend how little there would be in common with his mother and Sir Noel's young wife; the mean kind of jealousy with which all such natures as his mother's were unfortunately endowed, was of course instantly aroused by the arrival of such a wife at Yelverton, to wrest from this foolish, vain girl, the position of mistress, which she had held for her brother since her emancipation from the schoolroom.

This sort of jealousy had its value now, however; if he probed the matter a little further, Cuthbert could perhaps light on something that would be of great assistance to him.

Mrs. Denison was evidently annoyed even by the mere mention of her brother's dead wife.

"Why do you talk about her, Cuthbert," she asked, peevishly, "she is dead and gone; she did me a great deal of harm, and quite turned Noel away from me. I don't see what use there is in talking about her."

Cuthbert smiled faintly to himself.

"I have just returned from Yelverton, as you know, mother," he answered, calmly. "I came to tell you of my visit; naturally, though I heard nothing from my uncle's lips about his wife, I saw how strong her influence remained, even after all these years that have gone since her death; my curiosity has been roused not a little about this woman, hence my question to you just now. She must have been a very superior being if one can judge of the hold she seems to have had upon the affections and esteem of all who knew her!"

This was just the way to make Mrs. Denison talk.

"I don't know what you mean by superior person," she said, snappishly, "she was only the daughter of an Italian nobody; Noel of course declared she was a princess, and that her family was the oldest in Italy; but he was so infatuated no one believed him. It was not in the least the sort of marriage he ought to have made. I was furious when he wrote home and told me all about it. He could have married anyone; there was Lady Helen Cassilis, you know, she is the Duchess of Caledonia now; she was madly in love with Noel; and there were several other girls too who cared for him, and he must needs go and get entangled with this Italian creature, and nothing would satisfy him but to make her his wife. Such folly!"

Cuthbert listened in silence, he sat unmoved by his mother's irritation.

It was rarely that an interview with her was of so much interest or importance.

He could not remember indeed when he had indulged in such a conversation with his mother; hitherto he had never encouraged her reminiscences, they bored him too much, but now they were not only interesting, but necessary to him.

"You never met Lady Gretton then before she married my uncle?" he asked, when Mrs. Denison paused for breath.

"No, Noel met her somewhere out in Italy—Naples I believe; no one knew anything about her, except, that she was the daughter of a man who called himself Prince Vignetti."

Mrs. Denison said this most viciously.

"I no more believe he was a prince than I am a queen. Noel however was quite satisfied about it, and she gave herself great airs in consequence."

"The father's name was Prince Paolo Vignetti was it not?" Cuthbert queried, still in the same calm, semi-indolent manner.

Mrs. Denison nodded her head.

"And there was a brother called Paolo also; he had quarrelled with Noel about something, I don't know what, and she always pretended to be very unhappy about it."

"And it is the daughter of this same Paolo Vignetti who is at Yelverton now," Cuthbert mused. Immediately he set himself to see how he could utilise Anastasi in this business.

Would it be possible, he wondered, that she would know anything of her Aunt.

Surely the fact of that marriage with Luigi Schiotti must have been more or less well known. Anastasi was quite young still, she might have heard something about it. He must see how he could draw out this information from her if possible.

While these thoughts were passing swiftly in his mind he was speaking quietly to his mother.

"Then I suppose you knew very little about Lady Gretton; nothing as to her girlhood before she met Sir Noel; or anything of the sort?"

Mrs. Denison still wore a peevish air, it was evident her dislike to her sister-in-law must have been very bitter, since even after all these years the memory could disturb her so much.

"I never asked any questions," she said; "Noel only told me just what I have told you, and as for her—well, she could not speak a word of English, so we never talked together at all. I hated her for ever so many reasons; she took away all my friends, and wore my mother's diamonds, and she pretended to be so good and religious, while all the time she was making the biggest mischief between Noel and me. If she had been kind to me I should never have run away from home. Noel of course was unjust, he blamed me for everything and all the time he ought to have blamed her."

Cuthbert rose with a second curl of his lip.

If he had not known it before, he should have recognised now the poverty of his mother's nature.

It was evident also, that the information he desired was not to be gathered from her; more evident still that no whisper had been given of that first marriage with Luigi Schiotti, which was set down so surely in the flyleaf of that small prayer book.

He went away accordingly, and Mrs. Denison gave a sigh of relief, and ordered her maid to

draw down the blinds, and to leave her undisturbed till her doctor came.

As he drove away from his mother's house, Cuthbert determined there was only one course to pursue if he desired to get at the actual truth, and that was to go to the fountain head of all matters connected with the Gretton family, their lawyer Mr. Fielding.

He had a legitimate reason for calling on Mr. Fielding now, since he was appointed a co-trustee with that gentleman in the sum of money Sir Noel Gretton had made over to Anastasi Vignetti.

Cuthbert had no particular liking for Mr. Fielding, and he felt that Mr. Fielding had no particular liking for him. Sincere admiration he knew however he might claim from the Gretton solicitor, for Mr. Fielding had been present on more than one occasion, when Cuthbert had obtained some big legal success, and had in consequence advanced a stride in his profession.

Business on outside matters too, had passed between the two men, and Mr. Fielding just out of friendship and respect, and afterwards, out of genuine faith in Cuthbert's talents, had often put a valuable brief in the young barrister's hands.

It would be therefore not so very difficult for an acute being like Cuthbert to try and find out how much Mr. Fielding knew about his uncle's wife before her marriage with Sir Noel.

After partaking of his usual lunch, and having glanced at his letters at the office, Cuthbert sallied forth to attack Mr. Fielding.

Had his uncle's marriage been solemnised in England, of course the matter would have been comparatively speaking easy, for with a little trouble Cuthbert could have searched out the register of the marriage, and have there seen in what name Sir Noel's wife had been wedded.

Having however, taken place in Italy where he knew not, when he knew not either, the task was fraught with difficulty.

It was from Mr. Fielding therefore, Cuthbert hoped to obtain the first clue for further action.

The excitement that had overwhelmed him in the morning, had passed from its feverish stage into a calmer condition; it was there however just the same, and with it that eager determination to make capital out of this, to work upon its foundation the fabric of an edifice that should fall when he chose, and crush Jocelyn Gretton in its fall.

Mr. Fielding accorded an immediate interview to Mr. Denison, and for a quarter of an hour the conversation was devoted entirely to the questions of the business on which, henceforth, they would be connected as co-trustees. Then gradually led by Cuthbert in the subtlest manner the conversation became more expanded.

"My uncle seems devoted to Mdlle. Vignetti already," the young man said; "certainly she is very charming."

"I expect it is not only her individual charm that attracts Sir Noel," was Mr. Fielding's answer. "There is, you must remember, a close bond between her and his dead wife; her nationality alone would endear her to your uncle, if there were no other reason to recommend her."

Cuthbert assented in a thoughtful sort of way.

"What a good chap Jocelyn is," he said, suddenly, speaking in a tone of great warmth and sincerity. "I am afraid he is made of better stuff than I am, for I confess I should be inclined to regard my father's affection for this new-found cousin with some jealousy, were I he—Jocelyn, however, is quite content."

"Oh! Jocelyn Gretton is not an ordinary man by any means. I have the deepest admiration for him; he has always been the same ever since he was a little chap so high. Generous, noble, charitable, and as full of goodness as an egg is full of meat. It does one good to stop now and then and realize that there is such a man in the world as your cousin Jocelyn, Mr. Denison."

Cuthbert bent down to pick up a letter he had dropped. The action sent a flush to his pale face.

"You, at least, are not lukewarm in your affection and appreciation for him!" he said,

laughing, "but he has spoken to me so often of your friendship that I know it by heart now."

"I am very fond of him, very, and after all, you know, it is not every boy who grows up into a decent man who has had the sort of childhood that Jocelyn had." Mr. Fielding puffed away at his cigar. "His mother gone before she could leave any influence upon the child; a father isolated from the world by his grief; no brothers or sisters; the knowledge of his future position brought before him prominently. If Jocelyn had chosen to grow up an ill-conditioned weed instead of the fine, healthy creature he is to-day, what blame could have been given him?"

Cuthbert took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Lady Gretton must have been a rare woman to have inspired such a man as my uncle with such a lasting, such a complete and lasting sorrow at her loss," this he said very slowly and gently.

Mr. Fielding put down his cigar and folded his arms.

"It was not ordinary love he had for her, it was a devotion. I often used to say to myself in the first days of the marriage, 'what would become of this man should anything happen to take her from him?' I never anticipated so sad, so early a separation, though Lady Gretton was always a fragile bit of a thing that a puff of wind might have carried away, seemingly. Her charm was infinite—something that cannot be put into words. Jocelyn inherits it, though his appearance is so utterly unlike his mother's. Who would credit him with having a single drop of Italian blood in his veins? He is a Gretton in every line of him. The character of Lady Gretton has, however, descended to her son; she was quite the loveliest woman I have ever met, Mr. Denison, mentally or physically."

"Did you know her before her marriage to my uncle, Mr. Fielding?"

Mr. Fielding shook his head.

"No; the first announcement I got was a telegram from Sir Noel from Naples, telling me he was married, and would bring his wife to England immediately. They were married quite quietly in some little out-of-the-way church; the reason being that Lady Gretton's brother, father to this Mille Vignetti, was strongly averse to the marriage."

"And when an Italian does take an idea in his head one might as well try to move the sea," Cuthbert said, lightly—he rose as he spoke. "From her picture I agree with you, Mr. Fielding; my uncle's wife must have been quite lovely, and very young—a girl almost."

"I fancy Lady Gretton was about eighteen when she married."

"I expect, if we only knew all the circumstances, that the circumstances of this marriage must have been as pretty a little romance as one could wish to meet with anywhere," Cuthbert said as he took up his hat.

Mr. Fielding rose too, and smiled.

"I never have liked to ask Sir Noel any particulars; one is naturally diffident in such matters," he said. "All I know is that Lady Gretton chose to set her brother and family at defiance, sooner than part from her lover. I fancy they must have literally and actually run away, but my real acquaintance with any knowledge of the marriage dates from their arrival in England, just a year, roughly speaking, before Jocelyn was born."

Cuthbert held out his hand.

"The conversation is most interesting," he said, with a smile, "and I should like to prolong it, but unfortunately I must get back to work. I was called up from Yelverton this morning, greatly to my disappointment, as I should have liked to have extended my stay there; the place is so interesting one cannot grasp all its charms in one short visit," here Cuthbert took up his hat; "moreover," he added, with another smile, "Jocelyn desired to have me there most particularly to-day. Some friends were expected to lunch. I think I may safely prepare you to hear some great news concerning Jocelyn and his future before very long, Mr. Fielding; he has fallen in love, and with a charming little lady, one whom I have had the honour of serving—

Lady Hilliard; this will be a marriage in every way pleasant and suitable to the heir of Yelverton Castle."

Mr. Fielding expressed hearty assent as he went to the door with his visitor.

"I have heard of Lady Hilliard, she seems in every way delightful. I am glad to hear such news; and I hope the marriage will be soon; Jocelyn will make a model husband."

As the door was closed on Cuthbert's retreating form and Mr. Fielding was alone, he walked slowly back into his office.

"Now, why is it, I wonder, that I cannot bring myself to like that young man better than I do?" he asked himself; "there is no reason for dislike, and I am above prejudices I hope; yet I can't deny the fact; I don't like him, for all his cleverness and what is more I never shall, and that is the long and short of the matter!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE news of "Mr. Jocelyn's" betrothal spread like wildfire, all through the household and over the estate.

It had been quickly settled.

After that walk back under the trees together, Jocelyn had taken Margaret by the hand and led her to his father's room.

"We are come to tell you our great secret, and to ask you for your blessing, father dear," he said, as they stood together before Sir Noel's chair.

The old man answered in no words at first; he only drew the fair girl close to him, and fixed his eyes on her face, with an intensity as though to draw out her very heart of hearts, so that he might read it and know its truth and worth.

Though she blushed deeply beneath so strong a scrutiny, Margaret met it fearlessly, and her pure soul shone out bravely in her lovely eyes; the divinity of her love surrounded her as with a halo in this moment.

Sir Noel bent his head and kissed her small, white hand, then almost reverently he put it into Jocelyn's clasp.

"Guard her all your life, my son," he said, tenderly, "for she will be the greatest treasure you will ever know."

To Margaret he looked a second time.

"There has never been a son so good as mine, Margaret," he said; "be sure and strong in the knowledge of his love, trust him always, believe in him unflinchingly, and you will taste the sweetest happiness possible to us mortals here on earth."

There were tears in the eyes of both young people, as he spoke.

They stood for a little while, and then they went softly away.

As though Jocelyn had declared openly his intention, his father knew instantly where Margaret was being taken.

She had received his blessing, now Jocelyn would take her to stand before the picture of his mother, so that their union of hearts might be hallowed by the sweetness of her memory.

Sir Noel sat back in his chair very still; one thin hand covered his face.

Jocelyn's joy was his joy; what touched his boy touched him.

It was the truth of this that hurt the old man, for he knew so well the terrible anguish that must come to his son's heart, and that before very long.

A soft footstep roused him; he looked up to see Anastasi standing beside him, a world of eloquence in her marvellous eyes.

Sir Noel stretched out his hand to the girl.

"You know what has happened?" he asked, gently; very tenderly. He spoke in Italian.

Anastasi bent her head.

"I knew last night," she answered, "Jocelyn told me."

The voice was low, yet it did not tremble.

Sir Noel looked at her with admiration.

He was silent for a moment, then he spoke again,—

"Is the pain very deep, my poor child?" he asked, and there was a note of great sadness in his question.

Anastasi answered with a smile,—

"I can bear it."

The father passed his hand over her hair—she had knelt by his side.

"You have a grand nature, a great heart," he said; "would that I could have seen your happiness, my little girl."

Anastasi's eyes grew very luminous; the jewelled cross lying on her heart gleamed a hundred lights.

"If I can but serve him—if I can but be his friend, I am happy already—I shall be happy always," she whispered.

Sir Noel let his hand rest on her head.

"You must take my place when I am gone, and I shall be here but a very little longer. Anastasi, this is no news to you; you have seen it coming, but it will break most terribly upon him. I desire that there should be no delay in his happiness, no postponement; when death claims me, I want to go content in the thought that my boy is happy—a wife to comfort him, a friend to help him, and you will help him, Anastasi, I know it. I cannot see into the future, yet a fear that is very heavy lies upon my heart when I think of his future. I dread I know not what; I doubt I know not whom; my dread and doubt are there, however, and they will not pass away; only the thought of you dispels their power."

Anastasi looked up into the worn, white face.

"Comfort yourself, dear," she said, in her low, musical voice; "what can be done by a woman to help and protect a man shall be done by me for Jocelyn. You may rest in peace, knowing this. You are his father, but I am the woman who loves him better than life here, or Heaven hereafter; leave his future to me; have neither doubt nor dread, my life shall stand between him and all harm. I do not merely say this, I swear it to you, and my oath will never be forsworn!"

Sir Noel drew the girl closer to him; her head was pillowed on his breast for a long moment, her eyes seeking his face, saw that the troubled look had gone from it, that her words had given him comfort.

At the sound of Jocelyn and Margaret returning, Anastasi rose to her feet. Jocelyn stretched out his hands to her gladly.

"I want you to learn to love each other, not a little, but a good deal," he said, laughingly.

Margaret stood back, half shyly; perhaps in her heart of hearts she was a little frightened of Tasi, but the Italian girl, as though divining this, instantly swept away any such thought. Smiling gently, with that look in her eyes which so transformed her whole face, Anastasi bent forward, and drawing Margaret close to her kissed the fair flushed face softly several times.

"Jocelyn is my brother," she said, in her pretty English that still had the accent of her own musical language, "and you must be my sister; I will love you both just the same."

Jocelyn's heart had a thrill of joy; the discomfort and trouble that Cuthbert had planted there so carefully passed completely away in this moment. He had a tender delight at Tasi's words, and she, poor child, knowing this, felt quite repaid for the effort her little speech had cost her.

"We must go down into the garden again," she said, with a faint smile. "Miss Bartropp is alone; Lady Charlotte has fallen asleep under the trees."

"You are all going to remain to dinner," Jocelyn cried, gaily. "Come along, Tasi, we four will go and pick strawberries for dessert. Father, dear, what will you do?"

"I will stay here; I am comfortable up here, and I can watch you from my window."

"I shall return in half an hour," Tasi said, quietly, and then she followed the others from the room.

They went downstairs, a merry trio. None seeing them could have imagined it possible that the heart of one of them was as a burning stone in her breast, and that despair and desolation had fallen on her for ever.

Cuthbert had made a mistake for once; he had imagined that Anastasi Vignetti would prove an ally to him in his plans and schemes against Jocelyn's future, simply because her woman's



"WE ARE COME TO ASK YOU FOR YOUR BLESSING, FATHER DEAR!" SAID JOCELYN.

jealousy would turn her great love to a greater hate.

He had not been exaggerating when he told Jocelyn the preceding night that he should expect anything from a jealous Italian woman; but he had little guessed the quality of the nature that dwelt in Tasi's form, nor could he have conceived it possible that this delicate, fragile young creature was destined to come into his path in the immediate future, not as an ally, but as an enemy; an enemy he should not be able to despise or defeat very easily.

The news of the marriage arranged between Jocelyn Gretton and Margaret, Lady Hilliard, was received by the Duchess of Caledonia with the very greatest satisfaction. Instantly a letter was despatched to Margaret.

"You must come and stay with me as much as possible until you are married, child," the Duchess wrote. "I am enchanted that you have fallen in love with my pet boy. I knew, of course, he had fallen in love with you, but I was not sure—where you were concerned—as I have reason for knowing you to be a very 'difficult' young person. However, nothing could please me better, and now I hope you will not worry yourself any more about this tiresome business with the Hilliard family. Tell that young man, Mr. Denison, to settle the matter once and for all. I shall be thankful when you are out of it, especially as you must begin to be very busy getting all your clothes. Of course, you will be married immediately—what have you got to wait for? Is Jocelyn going to remain in the army? Write instantly and give me all the news."

This letter Margaret handed very quietly to her fiancé. She was back in her big London house, and Bobbie, the puppy, had already made considerable havoc of all the heavy, handsome furniture.

"This, I think, must be answered by you. Dear godmamma, she always asks so many questions all at the same time."

Jocelyn kissed the girl's little fingers, and then read the letter.

"She is a very sensible woman at all events," he remarked lightly. "You see she goes to the truth at the first shot."

"What truth?" enquired Margaret innocently. Jocelyn pointed to the sentence inscribed above—

"Of course, you are going to be married immediately—what have you got to wait for?"

"Now that is just where I consider she is not in the least degree sensible," Lady Hilliard remarked, with a deep blush and a smile; "of course, we are going to do nothing of the sort, Jocelyn."

Miss Bartropp, who was writing at a distant table, rose with an aggrieved air.

"When you two children have done squabbling," she said, "I will go on with my letters. Mercy on me, what *will* your married life be like—only engaged ten days, and now ready to tear out one another's eyes."

Margaret regarded her friend severely. "Jocelyn," she remarked sternly, "punish this audacious female."

In an instant Jocelyn had flown after Miss Bartropp, and then ensued a scene of wildest confusion, in which Margaret clapped her hands and Bobbie nearly choked himself with violent yaps; and, just as Kathleen had allowed herself to be caught by her pursuer, the door was opened and Lady Hilliard's important butler announced,—

"Mr. Denison."

Cuthbert entered the room cool and grave as usual, and Margaret jumped from her seat on the table to greet him.

"You may well stare, Mr. Denison," she said laughingly; "but this is the sort of thing that goes on all the time. I can't keep Miss Bartropp in order—and Jocelyn is incorrigible."

Cuthbert smiled faintly.

"I have come to say '*au revoir*.' I start for the Continent to-night," he said in his cold, clear voice. "I wanted to let you know there will be no further business possible for another week or

ten days, at which time I expect to be home again."

"Ugh!" said Kathleen Bartropp to herself, as she settled her ruffled locks; "he is more detestable than ever. Thank goodness my baby did not take a fancy to him as I feared she might."

Jocelyn was full of surprise at his cousin's departure.

"Going abroad, Cuthbert? By Jove! that is something new. Don't stay away too long—remember, there is our wedding; you must be at that."

"I am not likely to forget it," Cuthbert said, with apparent lightness.

"Well, I suppose you want to chat to Margaret. I will be off. I shall be back in an hour, my lady, so please be ready for our ride—I don't like to be kept waiting!"

Regardless of all present, Jocelyn put his arm round Margaret and kissed her softly, then he stretched out his hand to Cuthbert.

"*Au revoir*, dear old chap. I am so glad to have seen you before you go away. Why on earth did you not let me know sooner—I might have done something for you, though there is not much I can do for you. Mind you come back soon, and be sure you let us know directly you are returned. In an hour's time, my Margaret."

And with a smile Jocelyn wrung his cousin's hand and turned to go.

How little could he have imagined in this happy moment that it was the last time he would ever grasp Cuthbert Denison's hand in friendship or affection again. How little did he imagine of all that was to happen when they should meet the next time.

(To be continued.)

CHARLES V. asked to see his own funeral celebrated in the cathedral. It was done with the most minute detail, and made such frightful impression upon him that he actually died two days later.



"WHY CAN'T YOU CARE FOR ME?" CHAPMAN DEMANDED, HOTLY. "YOU HAVE KNOWN ME ALL YOUR LIFE."

ALISON'S MARRIAGE.

—30:—

CHAPTER III.

JAMES CHAPMAN was not a poor man. He had inherited from his father a small fortune and the best practice in Oakhempstead.

He was bound to pay his stepmother a percentage of the income arising from the latter for a good number of years; but even then there remained enough to enable him, had he chosen, to live in comfort and even luxury.

That he did not so choose was a marvel to everyone.

The Chapmans were in the best society in Oakhempstead, and certainly James was the only one of the family unpopular in the little town where they had lived so long.

Mrs. Chapman and her daughters still inhabited the old red-brick house, where she had come home a bride. It was hers for life, then it passed to Jim. He was an only son, and the gentle widow was not his own mother. Report was very vague as to the first Mrs. Chapman; but some people declared she had had a "touch of the tar-brush," for no European mother could have given James his dark swarthy complexion and his crisp curling hair. He was very handsome, but it was not an English face, and those who knew him best declared that his ways were not English ways.

He was on the best of terms with his stepmother and her girls. If they had not the same affection for him they would have had for a son and brother of their own they were very friendly with him, and the widow had even remonstrated with Jim for living in two small rooms over his office instead of taking a house suitable to his position.

Jim took the lecture in good part; but persisted he was very comfortable as he was, and should make no change until he married.

"I pity his wife," said Mrs. Chapman to her girls the day after this discussion; "Jim will want to shut her up in a glass case and never let

her speak to anyone but himself. He'll make a good husband in other ways; but he'll be a perfect Bluebeard for jealousy.

"Perhaps he won't find anyone to have him," suggested Grace. "You know, mother, Jim is rather an ogre in spite of his good looks."

"It isn't anyone he wants," chimed in Minnie, the elder girl. "Ever since I can remember anything Jim has been in love with Alison Hilton. Why in the world he hasn't told her so I can't imagine, unless his prudence won't allow him to take a penniless wife."

"Poor little Alison!" said Mrs. Chapman, pityingly, "I'm afraid she has a hard time of it now her father's dead. I wish you would ask her and Barbara here sometimes, it might cheer them up."

"It would be of no use, mother," returned Minnie; "those girls always remember we are Jim's sisters, and as they have no particular admiration for our worthy brother they fight shy of us."

Little did the kind-hearted trio suspect that that very evening Jim was at Rose Cottage conducting his wooing in a rather peculiar fashion. He chose a time when he knew Mrs. Hilton would be out, and when he imagined Barbara would be busy with the children, to present himself at the house. He told Martha his business was very important, and she made no demur about admitting him to the little parlour where Alison sat alone.

From the day when Bab warned her Jim Chapman loved her, Alison had avoided him steadily. For weeks they had not met alone, and something in the girl's white tired face touched the man's heart. Not that he intended to give up his wishes; only he pitied her for the hardships of her lot, and resolved that when once she was his wife he would load her with all that wealth could give, and never let her know another sorrow.

"Mamma is out," began Alison, gently; "but I expect her back in half an hour."

"It was you I came to see," returned Chapman, speaking abruptly, because he was so

terribly in earnest. "I would not speak until you had recovered from the shock of your father's death, but I can keep silence no longer. Alison, I want you to be my wife!"

The room seemed to turn round with Alison. She saw nothing distinctly except the tall dark figure opposite herself. She was trembling from head to foot, but she never hesitated as to the answer.

"I am very sorry you should wish it, Mr. Chapman," she said, gravely, "for it is impossible."

"Why?"

Only just that one sharp word of inquiry. Alison would have preferred passionate reproaches or angry indignation to this terrible brevity.

"I have no love to give you," replied the girl; "and I shall never marry anyone unless I care for him."

"Why can't you care for me?" he demanded, hotly. "You have known me all your life. Ten years is no terrible difference between husband and wife. I will take you away from your mother's petty slights. Oh, I know all she has made you suffer since Mr. Hilton's death. I will give you a beautiful home and the passionate devotion of my whole heart, if only you will trust yourself to me."

"I cannot! Oh, I cannot!" cried the poor girl. "Mr. Chapman, I do not love you; it is cruel to persecute me like this."

His dark eyes never left her face. The terrible glitter in their depths almost terrified Alison. She would have given worlds to get away from him, but a nameless fascination held her spell-bound to her chair. Oh, why did not Barbara come, or her mother, anyone, anything just to break this terrible tête-à-tête?

"You will marry me," said Chapman, gravely, "or you will ruin every one you care for. I do not think you will hesitate between such alternatives."

"It is not true," cried Alison; "mother will be terribly angry, of course, because you are rich, but you cannot ruin us."

He smiled a curious sinister sort of smile.

"Sit down again and listen to me," he said, with a quiet authority she could not resist. "Ever since your father died I have plotted and planned to win you; I feared you were romantic, and that I should have no chance if I trusted only to your liking me. I spread my snares skilfully, and I tell you you cannot escape. Be my idolized wife, or the ruin I have spoken of shall fall upon you all."

"I don't believe it!"

"Are you in your mother's confidence?"

"Not entirely," said Alison, with a painful consciousness that of late nothing she could do or say found favour with her mother.

Mr. Chapman smiled, and then with an air of quiet triumph, he put the position before her in simple language, above of all legal phrases; he made the case so clear that Alison shuddered as she realised how utterly her mother's folly had placed them in this man's power.

When the organist died so suddenly, there were the usual outlandish bills; in his time things were paid for quarterly because his salary was received so. These bills, the expenses of the funeral and of the family mourning, came to more than double the amount due to his widow for his professional services; there was a deficit of seventy pounds, besides which, Mrs. Hilton and her children had to live, and the rent and taxes, not to speak of Martha's wages, left a very few shillings weekly of Mr. Buld's payments.

First James Chapman proposed the bill of sale as security for a loan of fifty pounds; then he advanced another twenty-five on the security of Mrs. Hilton's note of hand; then he took to "lending" her two pounds a-week until her daughters got situations, and were able to support themselves.

The total amount she owed him now was over a hundred pounds. He told Alison frankly he did not need the money, but he wanted her; the day she became his wife he would destroy the bill of sale and notes of hand he held of her mother's, and would settle on Mrs. Hilton a hundred a-year and give her the use of Rose Cottage for her life.

"And if not?"

"It is very soon told,—the law must take its course. Mr. King, the party in whose favour the bill of sale was given, will take possession of the furniture, your mother and the children will be turned into the streets."

"We have friends," said poor Alison desperately, "who would save us from your tyranny."

"It would not appear as tyranny; the agreement was for Mrs. Hilton to repay the loan in weekly instalments; not one of those has been met as it fell due. I should not appear at all in the matter; my client, Mr. King, could not be accused of sharp practice, since he has waited over three months patiently."

"A hundred pounds," breathed Alison feverishly; "to think that that sum would free us from your yoke."

"For a little while," he replied equably, "but your mother would repeat the whole thing. I can assure you, Alison, she does not disapprove of need a son-in-law. Granted by a mighty effort you paid off this sum, in another three months the process would have to be repeated. Mrs. Hilton has no means of earning money, she cannot live on the curate's rent, your uncle the ham and beef merchant might possibly engage one of you to serve in his shop if you ate a sufficient quantity of humble pie; but that would still leave half-a-dozen children on your mother's hands."

"Barbara and I shall get situations; Mr. Grant is trying to recommend us."

"You will never get situations in Oakhempstead; your father was very popular here, but no one ever liked your mother. Another obstacle is your beauty; ladies do not care for a governess as attractive as you and Barbara."

Alison looked at him hopelessly.

"You cannot love me, or you would not wish to make my whole life miserable."

"On the contrary, I want to make your whole life happy; as my wife you will enjoy all the refinements for which you pine, your mother will be amiable to her rich daughter-in-law, you shall have Barbara—though I know she hates me—to

see you constantly. I swear to you, Alison, if only you will listen to me you shall never regret it."

"Give me time," pleaded the poor girl, "my head feels on fire; I cannot think or calculate; at least give me time."

"I will give you three days," he answered in a gentler voice. "On Thursday evening I will come for your decision, and I only hope it will be what I hope for."

"It will be if I can manage it," said Mrs. Hilton sharply; she had come into the parlour unnoticed in time to hear the last remark. "You had better understand me clearly, Alison, unless you marry Mr. Chapman, away from here you go. I may not have a roof over my head much longer, but while I have one it shall not shelter you."

Mr. Chapman thought it as well to take his departure, so the two women were left alone—the angry mother and the daughter whose heart was slowly breaking.

"Mother," she cried in her anguish, "have pity on me; remember your own young days, and my father; do not force me to marry a man I hate."

"You've no cause to hate him; as for your father, you'd better not mention him to me; thanks to his thoughtlessness and folly I'm left penniless."

"Mother"—and Alison's voice was so sad it ought to have touched the mother's heart—"let me go away as resident governess. Even if I only earn ten pounds a year, I shall not cost you another penny."

"Oh, yes; you'd go away and live in plenty, while we starve. Alison, I declare, I'm ashamed of your selfishness. If you anger Mr. Chapman there'll not be a stick of furniture left in the house. The children and I may just go to the union."

"Couldn't we raise the money anyhow, mother?" pleaded the girl. "I would sooner beg Mr. Grant to help us than blight my life."

"Mr. Grant wouldn't give me a shilling; and if he did, what would be the use? If the money were paid to James Chapman to-morrow, there would only be starvation before us. The curate's money leaves just eight shillings a week when my rent is paid. Eight people can't live on that."

It was true, perfectly true. The iron entered into Alison's soul. She might have managed for herself. Had she and Barbara agreed to leave Oakhempstead, she knew Mrs. Grant would have found them situations; but for her mother and the little ones it was, indeed, a dreary prospect.

Mrs. Hilton saw she had made an impression, and was quick to follow it up.

"Your father trusted James Chapman, and brought him to the house. It's not as though I were asking you to marry a stranger, or a man of bad habits, or what you call low birth. You've known Jim all your life. He's one of the most rising men in the place, and he might marry any one in the town."

Alison got up from her chair. Oh, how tired she felt! It was as though her aching knees would hardly bear to stand.

"He has given me three days to think it over," she said sadly. "Mother, let me have peace till Thursday. I have promised him my answer then."

And upstairs she sank on her knees by the bedside, and with her face buried in the counterpane, she gave way to the agony which consumed her—bitter, voiceless sobs, such as come only when the heart is near to breaking.

And then it was that Barbara came in, happy from her recent meeting with her lover, and learned the trouble which had befallen her sister.

CHAPTER IV.

It was the same month which had brought the calamity of their father's sudden death to Alison and Barbara Hilton; and another home, very different in its palatial splendour from poor little Rose Cottage, was also a house of mourning.

Coombe Lorraine, the ancestral demesne of the Earls of Lorraine, had every window darkened, while within servants moved with bated breath

and hushed footfall; for, though no lifeless form lay there stretched in its last quiet sleep, though no funeral would issue presently from its gates, yet the fact remained—a sore blow had fallen upon the house.

And an utterly unexpected one. Lord Dare, the heir to the grand old name, and a young man full of promise, had died on his voyage home from America, and been buried at sea. On the day his father was expecting to welcome his only child, he received the news of his death.

The Earl was not an old man; as years count age—barely sixty—but the blow seemed to age him suddenly; and when, after a week of utter seclusion, his stately form appeared once more in the village church, the simple country folk declared he had aged ten years since they had seen him last.

The loss was an exceptionally sad one, because Lord Dare was one of those young men who seem born to shed lustre on their name—clever, persevering, noble, brave, and true, he had never given his father an hour of uneasiness, and had never differed from him on any subject, save when the Earl pressed him to take a wife, and Geoff had replied, with his winning smile, that "there was time enough yet."

Lady Lorraine had been dead so many years that people had almost forgotten her; but the Castle had a gracious, bountiful châtelineau, for Lady Mary Dare, the Earl's only sister, lived with him. Coombe Lorraine had been her home ever since she returned to England, after many years' residence in India, a newly-made widow with one only son.

Lady Mary had married her first cousin, and so had never changed her name. The Coombe Lorraine property could descend in the female line, so, since Lord Dare's sad death, she was her brother's heiress presumptive, though the title would pass to her son, in right of his being through his father, the next male heir.

Lionel was twenty-six now; not half as perfect, not half so handsome, as his cousin Dare but infinitely more beloved. The servants at Coombe Lorraine, the villagers and tenants fairly worshipped Mr. Lionel, or, as since he had obtained his step, he was generally called, Captain Dare.

Lionel's regiment was stationed only a few miles from Coombe Lorraine, so he often rode over to see his family.

The first visit he paid them after the news of his cousin's death was naturally a sad one.

"You know, mother," the young fellow told Lady Mary, as they sat together at lunch, which the Earl took in his own room, "you know, I never was so astonished in my life. Dare was just one of those men one expected to live to be a hundred! I can guess my uncle feels it terribly."

"He does. You must not mind his refusing to see you, Lal. You see, he can't forget his loss is your gain, since you are now heir to Coombe Lorraine."

"I don't expect ever to be master here," said Lal pleasantly. "The Earl may live another twenty years. Why shouldn't he marry again and have a second family?"

"I'm sure I hope he won't," said Lady Mary earnestly; "but there's no fear of that, Lal. Coombe Lorraine must come to me first, and you later; only that I'm sure I should give it up to you."

The butler had placed the dial on the table and withdrawn, or the conversation would not have been so confidential.

"Second marriages run in our family," said Lal lightly; "my father and grandfather both indulged in them."

Lady Mary never liked to be reminded she had been a second wife, so she passed over the first half of the sentence.

"My father was thoroughly mistaken," she said, in an aggrieved tone. "He married my governess. She was a pretty, gentle creature, but not in the least fitted to be a Countess. When he died my brother behaved very well; he offered her five hundred a year (there was no settlement, and she had nothing to live on) if she would settle abroad. She dropped her title and went to reside in a quiet German town with her boy. I fancy

she was far happier there than she ever was at Combe Lorraine."

"A boy!" exclaimed Lal; "that complicates matters. You and I need not anticipate being grand folks, mother mine, for the claims of this juvenile uncle would certainly outweigh ours."

"Yes, if he were alive," agreed Lady Mary; "but he died while we were in India. I don't remember any particulars, but I know there was something very painful about the affair, for your Uncle Geoffrey wrote and requested I would never mention poor George to him again. He was only twenty-four."

"Do you remember him?"

"Not very well. He was a child of seven when my father died, and none of us held any communication with our step-mother after she left England. The Dares are a haughty race, Lal, and can't look over a *mésalliance*. Mind you don't make one, my boy; for I think it would break my heart."

He was the youngest of seven children born to her in her Indian home, and the only one who had lived beyond infancy. Little wonder she was devoted to him. He might not be so handsome as his cousin, the dead Viscount, but it was a good, earnest face; the brown eyes were clear and truthful, the bonny chestnut hair framed a broad, intellectual forehead, the smile was so full of kindness it did one good to see it, and the old servants were not so very wrong when they declared Mr. Lionel was "a sight for sore eyes."

Lal coloured at his mother's speech almost like a boy.

"I'm not likely to make a *mésalliance*, mother dear; and I certainly can't afford a grand match, for I'm a shocking detrimental. No, don't talk of increasing my allowance, for you can't afford it, and I manage well enough as a bachelor, but you know I'm about the poorest officer in the 55th. I make no secret of it," he added laughing; "when the fellows ask me to go in for things I can't afford, I always tell them to remember I'm nothing but a genteel pauper."

Lady Mary looked vexed; she had her own share of pride and her son's too.

"All that is changed now, Lal. The Lorraine property is worth twenty thousand a year, and it must come to me—to us, some day."

Lionel shook his head.

"That won't make any difference, mother. It would be heartless to go to Uncle Geoffrey and tell him that, as I stood in his son's place, he ought to make me a decent allowance. I never was a particular favourite of the Earl's, and I shall be less so now, for I daresay he's thinking what a pity it is I wasn't taken and Dare spared."

"Lionel!"

"I don't want to shock you, mother, but you are not to count on Uncle Geoffrey doing anything for me. I can't tell you why—for I am sure I was too young when I came here to have offended him—but from the day we returned to England he has disliked me. Poor old Dare stood my friend many a time, and I really believe loved me as a younger brother; but my uncle does not approve of me, and never will."

Captain Dare rode back to Burnham soon after lunch, and Lady Mary felt a shadow of disappointment that her brother should have refused to see him.

She was fond of Geoffrey. They suited each other, and generally thought alike, but she wished he would be more cordial to Lal. Now she came to think of it, he had never mentioned her son's name since his own great trouble. He had given no sign he remembered the enormous difference his son's death made in his nephew's prospects.

Later that day Lord Lorraine came into the cool, spacious drawing-room for afternoon tea. He was a tall, gaunt-looking man, with rugged features and a heavy expression, as though life had been a disappointment to him. He had never been popular in Northshire; his neighbours thought him ridiculously proud; the poor people never forgot the harsh treatment he had meted out to his step-mother when he first came into his honours, thirty-seven years before.

He was not a bad landlord, but he had never won a grain of affection, and though the villagers had felt proud of the young Viscount's good looks and rare talents, they had never given him a tithe

of the love they poured out so lavishly on his cousin Lionel.

Lord Lorraine sipped his tea and looked curiously at his sister. Time had dealt very kindly with Lady Mary; she was a graceful, handsome woman still.

"What did Lionel want to-day?"

Lady Mary had wished he would mention her son's name, but this was not a very promising commencement.

"He only rode over to see us, Geoffrey; you know he generally does come pretty often now he is stationed at Burnham."

"Ugh! I thought perhaps he came to gloat over my troubles and take note of the inheritance he expects will come to him."

Lady Mary's eyes certainly quailed before this terrible old man.

"Lal is the last person in the world to gloat over any one's trouble; and you know, Geoffrey, he and poor Dare were staunch friends."

"Ugh! What did he say about it. Oh, I don't want his regrets and condolences; of course you'd pretend he expressed a cart load of sympathy. What did he say about the future?"

"The future," poor Lady Mary repeated in a bewildered sort of way. She really could not understand her brother on this June day.

"Don't echo my words like a parrot if you please. Lionel was here three hours. I'll not believe there was no mention made of the change you think my boy's death has made in his fortune."

The two words "you think," had a very ominous sound to Lady Mary. Surely this terrible old man could not really be contemplating a second wife?

"If you want to know exactly what passed, I will tell you."

"Go on."

"Lionel said you would probably live another twenty years, and that there was no reason why you should not marry again and leave a family of your own."

"He's more sense than I gave him credit for," was the astonishing reply; "and you, my dear, agreed with him I conclude!"

Lady Mary lost her temper. She forgot her brother's recent loss, and gave him a piece of her mind in very plain terms.

"I said I did not think you would be such an idiot," she returned, sharply. "My father's second marriage was not much of a success."

"I don't know," said the Earl, slowly, he was in an aggravating mood and would have differed from his sister in any case. "Miss Hope was a pleasant, home-loving girl. She always seemed rather overwhelmed by her honours, but she made my father very happy. The last years of his life were pleasanter than they would have been had he remained as a lone, lorn widower."

"Your opinion has changed," said his sister, cuttingly; "you were anxious enough to get rid of her."

"Come," returned Lord Lorraine, "there's no need for us to quarrel, Mary. There are one or two things I had better say to you, and perhaps you won't find them very pleasant hearing, but I don't believe in deceptions. I would far rather speak my mind frankly."

"I am listening," said Lady Mary, haughtily; "pray do you wish me to leave Combe Lorraine and make room for a youthful bride?"

"Don't talk nonsense," was the sharp reproof, "as far as I can see you can stay at Combe Lorraine as its mistress until I am gathered to my fathers; but," and here he brought down his hand on the table with such force that the china and silver positively rattled on the tea tray, "you are not to look upon yourself as my heiress, or to imagine that boy of yours will be Lord Lorraine."

Lady Mary stared at him.

"Geoffrey," she said, in a milder tone, "please don't talk in riddles. I assure you Lionel is not counting on being your heir. My boy is too noble to sit down and wait for dead men's shoes," but the entail on the property is a strict one, so unless you leave a child of your own it seems to me that Lal must someday be the Earl of Lorraine."

"He will not."

"But—"

"My father left two sons," went on her brother, in cold measured accents, "you are forgetting the existence of our half-brother."

"But George died while I was in India; don't you remember, Geoffrey, you wrote and told me so. You desired his name might never be mentioned, as the whole affair was most distasteful to you."

"So it was," agreed the Earl. "I offered to continue to him the pension I had paid to his mother, and as a fact I did so till I heard he had returned to England, and was mixing in the most Bohemian society he could find in London. I wrote and gave him his choice. He must return to Germany, or not another penny of my money should be seen. He replied that nothing would induce him to expatriate himself any longer, and I might do my worst. A friend of mine, Colonel Monroy, told me George had actually married some low-born girl who waited at the restaurant where he took his meals. Of course, I washed my hands of him, two years later I saw his death in the *Times*."

"But are you certain it was George?" exclaimed Lady Mary, anxiously.

"Positive. The announcement ran, 'suddenly, of inflammation of the lungs, George Dare,' (he had had the grace to leave out the Honourable). I employed a detective to make inquiries. He tracked them to a lodging-house near Bloomsbury, and the landlady declared when they left her the husband looked like death. If I had known he was to die so soon I don't think I would have been so hard on him, Mary. My detective had a great difficulty in tracing him because he never used the name of Dare, but passed under a professional title he had taken in Germany when he tried his fortune on the stage."

Lady Mary had listened anxiously. She looked up at the Earl when he finished.

"But if George is dead," she said, slowly. "I can't see why—"

"Hush," her brother interrupted, "I am coming to that. That miserable girl bore him a child. I declare it's terrible to think of. The waitress at a third-rate restaurant not only has the right to call herself the Honourable Mrs. Dare, but she has had the sole charge and bringing up of the lad who must it seems now one day be Earl of Lorraine and master of this place."

"Geoffrey!"

The old man lost his rough, churlish manner now; he looked at his sister with something very like compassion.

"It's hard on you, Mary, and it's very hard on me. If I could have foreseen this I'd have claimed the guardianship of the child when George died, and brought him up respectfully. Heaven only knows what he'll be like; he may be a cobbler, or a brewer's drayman; he must be twenty-one, too, by this time."

"You will have to find him at once," exclaimed Lady Mary practically. "Geoff, the sooner you begin to polish him the better."

"It's a bitter blow to you," said the Earl, gravely, "but it would have been worse if I'd let you go on thinking Lal my heir, and at my death you had had to be enlightened."

"Yes," she said quite humbly, "I'm glad you've told me the truth, Geoffrey, and—really I could forgive you if you married again, just to keep that man out."

The Earl smiled half sadly.

"I shan't do that, my dear; I loved my wife too well to marry again when I was in the prime of life, and I shall not do it now that I am old and feeble. I may last a few years more, and I have saved a good deal of money; you'll find whenever I die you and Lionel have not been forgotten."

"You have always been most generous to us both, Geoffrey; Lal declares you don't like him, but I am sure he is mistaken."

"I'm afraid I grudge him the power of winning hearts," confessed the Earl; "I could not bear to think anyone loved him better than my own son, and then—you never saw our half-brother after he grew up did you Mary?"

"Never after he was eight years old."

"Well, Lal bears a strong resemblance to poor George as I saw him last, when I went up to remonstrate with him on his foolish marriage; your boy has always reminded me of George, and I would gladly have forgotten that memory."

"I may tell Lionel?" asked Lady Mary, when the discussion was nearly over.

"I will tell him myself," said the Earl; "write and see if he can come over to us from Saturday to Monday, it is easier to speak of these things than to write them."

Lionel Dare came as requested, and after dinner in the summer gloaming, the Earl told him why he must not look forward to being master of Combe Lorraine; he was very pleased at Lal's frank response.

"I never looked forward to it, uncle; I have always had the impression since poor Dare's death, that you would marry again."

"Your mother says she would forgive me even that under existing circumstances," said the old nobleman with a smile; "but I feel the time is past for such a step, and I intend to go up to London next week and begin the search for your unknown cousin."

"You will have to be very careful," said Lal frankly; "it would be a terrible temptation to all impostors."

"I shall not stir in it myself; the detective I employed twenty years ago must resume his task: he was a clever fellow; he wanted to give me a bundle of papers about the case, as he called it, but I would not take them, I said my interest in the George Dares ceased with my half-brother's death."

Lal looked up thoughtfully.

"It seems a pity you did not take the papers; if the detective has not preserved them how will you trace Mrs. Dare and her son, since you say she was known by an assumed name?"

"Oh, of course the detective will remember the name, those fellows never forget anything; it would never do to advertise for the address of 'George Dare,' because, as you say, it would be a temptation to impostors."

"Well, I wish you success," said Lionel, warmly, "at twenty-one there will be time to civilize him; you might send him to make the grand tour with a tutor, or have him here and drill him in etiquette and that sort of thing. After all," added the Captain seeing Lord Lorraine did not seem very cheerful at this proposal, "he's a Dare on one side, so he cannot be so very awful."

Lord Lorraine sighed.

"You'll have to keep all this to yourself, Lal; for the present we must let the world at large believe you and your mother stand next in the succession, it won't be for long, I should think six weeks would be ample time to find your cousin."

But Lionel had his doubts of this; he was not nearly so sanguine as his uncle, and events proved him right, for the Earl met with a check at the very outset of his search.

When he presented himself at the residence of the detective he had previously employed, it was to find that he had died a few months previously, and not a trace of his professional notes remained; the widow was most deferential, and recommended Lord Lorraine to a friend of her husband's, a shining light in his profession, but the Earl left the house in despair. It seemed to him that seeking a man of whom he had heard nothing for twenty years (when he was an infant) in London, was very much like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay.

(To be continued.)

In Spain the baby's face is swept with a pine-tree bough to bring good luck. In Ireland a belt made of woman's hair is placed about the child to keep harm away. Garlic, salt, bread, and steak are put into the cradle of a new-born babe in Holland. Rumanian mothers tie red ribbons round the ankles of their children to preserve them from harm. Welsh mothers put a pair of tongs or a knife in the cradle to insure the safety of their children; the knife is also used for the same purpose in some parts of England.

NORA'S HERO.

—O—

CHAPTER I.

PEOPLE said it was the coldest day that had been known in England for thirty years, and yet there seemed to be no lack of pedestrians. They may have hurried a little more than usual, there may have been the perceptible chatter of teeth, and an upraising of every coat collar that would permit of it, but business in Liverpool does not wait upon weather. There is coal to buy and food to obtain, and in this great city by the river, the spryest man gets it, which is one cause of the constant "hustle."

The low temperature did not seem to affect Kenward Chester particularly, however, for he strolled along with his hands in the pockets of his greatcoat, puffing at a fragrant cigar, and alternating it from one side of his mouth to the other without touching it with his fingers, a fact which invariably indicates absorption on the part of a man.

It would have been a difficult matter for Chester to get cold, when one thought of it, for his coat was lined with mink, so handsome in quality that it might easily have been mistaken for Russian sable, and the heavy collar was turned up until it concealed the lower part of his face, except where the cigar protruded.

But for all the concealment, it did not require a second glance to tell you that the man who strolled there so leisurely was a handsome man. He carried his six feet of stature with consummate grace. Below his high and well-polished hat a glimpse of his dark hair was visible, closely cropped, yet showing a decided inclination to curl. His gray eyes, darkly fringed, were abstracted and thoughtful, yet, under their quiet expression one could read great possibilities of passion that lent character and manliness to the face that otherwise would have been almost too beautiful.

But there was nothing of the "gilded darling" about Kenward Chester. There was not a man in Liverpool who spoke his name with anything but respect. He was a man who had made his own fortune. He was of an excellent family, but he owed them nothing but his name. His father had been too aristocratic to work, and the consequence was that, only inheriting a limited fortune, which the war entirely swept away, he had left Kenward at the age of ten, with a widowed mother to support.

The boy had been quite equal to it however; and while his democratic ideas were a source of great grief to his mother in his earlier years, they became a source of equally great comfort to her later on.

But the sorrow in her life, which lingered to the day of her death, was that Kenward had become an actor.

He was not an ordinary actor—far from it. He invested every part he played with an individuality that stamped him as a genius. But the plaudits of the multitude never reconciled her. She absolutely refused to have anything to do with that sort of his life. He never spoke of it in her presence; she never read a paper, lest she should see some account of his playing in it, and she never met one of his associates in the theatre.

And Kenward never tried to force it upon her. He loved her as few sons love their mothers, and that had been the only sorrow that he had ever brought into her life. He saved his money, without being in the least penurious, and profitable investments had enabled him to double it many times, so that at the age of thirty he had accumulated a snug fortune, and had promised himself that at the end of another five years, if they should prove even half as successful as the last, that he would retire from the stage for his mother's sake.

Upon this frigid day in late December, he was going from the office of his banker and broker to inspect the electrical works of a concern in which he had been advised to invest, and the portion of the city through which he was then passing was anything but picturesque.

If he had looked about him he would have seen nothing but the greatest poverty and suffering upon all sides—miserable, draughty, half-tumbled-down houses, with wretchedly clad children huddled about the doors in their efforts to keep warm; here and there a stumbling wretch who had endeavoured to "build a fire upon the inside," and occasionally a depraved woman in a similar or worse condition.

But Chester was not thinking of them. He was busy with the "points" that his broker had been impressing upon him. He was not particularly familiar with electrical concerns, and he paused suddenly, unbuttoning his coat, regardless of the cold.

"If I don't make a memorandum of those things, I shall forget half of them," he said, aloud.

He thrust his hand into his pocket for his book, but found no pencil in its accustomed place.

"Confound it!" he ejaculated, "I've left it at Bolton's office! I wonder——"

He glanced about him without completing the sentence.

Near him was a small store containing a little of everything under Heaven, it seemed to him. There were a few frozen vegetables upon the outside, a bushel basket containing coal, a few bundles of wood; and inside, through the broken glass door, he saw a tiny case, not overclean, containing brass articles, some needles and thread, and other articles which he could not exactly designate.

He opened the door and went in.

A rather comely Irish woman came from an inner room as she heard the tinkle of the bell upon the broken door, and smiled good-naturedly.

"Have you any lead pencils?" Kenward asked.

"No; that have I not, fur sale, but I can let yez have my own, if it 'ud be innny accommodation, sir."

She extended to him a decent pencil, and he took it from her.

"How much?" he asked.

"A penny."

He smiled as he placed the coin upon the little counter; then began, while standing there, to jot down the things that his broker had cautioned him to remember.

"It's a cawld day, sir," exclaimed the good-hearted Irish woman.

"Very," he answered, without glancing up.

"And much sufferin' among the poor!"

"It must be dreadful!"

"Dreadful, is it, and them a-freezin' like cattle! Why, bless yer heart, sir, there is thim around in this neighbourhood as is a-wearin' calico dresses next to their skins, and not a blisid rag but that to their backs!"

"Can that be true?"

"True, is it? Why, there is——"

But the flow of conversation was interrupted by the jingle of the bell again, and the Irish woman broke off to exclaim,—

"Och, Nora, darlin'! is it you? An' how is yer poor mither to-day?"

"I ain't seen her this mornin'," the girl answered, half sullenly. "I want a penn'orth o' pertaters, Betty."

Something in the voice, he scarcely knew what at the time, attracted Kenward, and he looked in the direction of the girl whom the shop-woman had called Nora. It may have been the sweetness of her voice, in spite of its sullenness and the stamp of ignorance in her selection of language and pronunciation. He could see nothing but her back at that moment, but it was so slight and singularly graceful, that Kenward forgot his memorandum, and continued to watch her.

"A penn'orth o' pertaters, is it, and thim ten shillings and a half a barrel, agin five shillings a month ago!" exclaimed Betty. "It ain't much, Nora."

"I know it ain't," answered the girl, dully; "but it's all I got, and Lu is hungry."

As she spoke, she put out an old, worn-out coal-scuttle to receive the potatoes, and the kindly Irish woman put a few more into it than the

penny called for, though Chester could readily see that she could ill afford the charity.

And then he moved his position and caught sight of the girl's face.

He never forgot it as he saw it then. It was the face of an angel. The curly golden hair was blown in dishevelled masses about the shoulders and half across the face, into which the wind had bitten some colour; the dark-blue eyes were fringed with lashes and arched by brows that were almost black and as delicate as those of some Eastern princess. Her mouth was as dainty and delicately moulded as that of some beautiful, sensitive child, and over the entire face there rested a sadness, a patient, meekly borne melancholy that gave to her the appearance of a Madonna.

He could scarcely believe it possible that it was through those lips that he had heard the evidences he had of their owner's ignorance, and yet he had scarcely thought of it, when she lifted the old coal scuttle and was gone.

He might have believed it to be a creation of his brain, but there was the penny of which she had spoken still lying upon the counter, and Betty took it up and dropped it in the drawer as he looked.

"Who is she?" Kenward asked, striving to control the eagerness of his tone.

"Her name is Nora—Nora Colson," answered Betty, with a miserable shake of the head.

"Poor child! poor lamb! It's a hard time of it she has, but be sure, with that sick child to take care of, and her mother drunk from mornin' until night!"

"Drunk?"

"Och, an' it is that same. She's drunk whin she ain't in prison."

"Where does she live?"

"In number twenty-seven, across the way. But it's a good girl, is Nora."

She added the last sentence with a furtive glance in the direction of Chester, as if she had said too much; but a look into his manly face seemed to satisfy her for the nonce.

"And they are poor?" he asked.

"Starvin'! The mother, bad cess to her! takes ivir'ing rum."

"Do you think—Miss—Miss Colson would take it amiss if I should call upon her and see if there is anything I can do to make life more comfortable for her?"

He stammered a trifle over the words, and his face coloured.

Betty hesitated a moment, then leaned over the counter and placed her hand upon his arm.

"You're a gentleman, and ye don't mean no harm to her, do yer, sir?"

"Upon my soul, no!" answered Kenward, earnestly. "I would die sooner than harm a hair of her beautiful head."

"Then go, sir, and Heaven bless ye! Number twenty-seven, sir."

"Thank you. I will see you again."

Chester went out and closed the door upon himself.

"She's drunk when not in prison," he repeated, looking across the street for the number.

"And that poor, beautiful child lives here among these wretches, worse than alone, with her sick sister to take care of, while she starves! How little we know of the misery which surrounds us every day of our lives! Drunk when not in prison!"

Kenward Chester shivered and buttoned up his coat, then crossed the street.

CHAPTER II.

In the hall-way of No. 27 there were two children standing closely together, with an old and much-worn shawl wrapped around them. Their hair was matted and unkempt, and their features pinched and white from cold and hunger. Chester paused and looked down upon them.

"Can you tell me where I shall find Miss Colson?" he asked kindly.

"Miss Colson lives top back," answered one; but she ain't home. Nora is up there, sir."

"Thank you. Aren't you cold?"

"Froze," answered the same voice; "but there ain't no coal, an' it's colder up there'n it is here."

Kenward stood for a moment as if thinking deeply, then he said, quietly:

"Both of you go over to that little store across the way, and tell the woman they call Betty that I sent you. Tell her to let you sit by her fire until I come."

They looked at each other as if they scarcely understood what had been said to them, then one of them moved slowly, as if the effort were painful. They said nothing, but, more obediently than usual, they started across the street, while Kenward mounted the rickety stairs.

All his life he had been called a charitable man, but he had given through other people. It was not that he desired to spare himself the pain of seeing suffering, but he had been too busy, and he felt that those who devoted their whole time to looking up real cases of charity knew better than he where to give. Consequently this was his first real experience.

He looked about him wonderingly. There were evidences of the most absolute penury upon every side. He could scarcely understand it. At ten years of age he had been left with a mother to support, and he had done it. How was it possible, then, for great, strong men to be unable to make a bare subsistence?

He reached the top floor back, and knocked lightly. A voice from the inside called "Come in!" and he recognized the one that he had heard in Betty's shop. He opened the door gently and entered.

He had never seen anything like the picture that was presented to him, even in his life upon the stage.

There was no bed in the room, but only a bundle of straw near the little broken stove, over which an old and much worn calico skirt was spread; a single broken chair, and a rickety table, on which was a tin wash basin, composed the entire furniture in the room. Beside the stove lay some pieces of wood, but too evidently a portion of the bed, which had been destroyed for fuel.

Upon the straw a child lay, pallid and pinched, from deprivation and illness, and beside the stove, as if she had just arisen from her knees, Nora stood.

A curious expression of surprise crossed her face as she saw the stranger. A slow colour mounted to her forehead, and then the old sullen misery returned, and she stood there like some hunted animal brought to bay.

Chester had never been so embarrassed in his life before. He did not know what to say; but as neither of the girls showed any disposition to open the conversation, he saw that he must do so.

His hat was in his hand, that high silk hat that looked so strangely out of place in the little, low-ceilinged room, and his manner was as deferential as it might have been to an empress, as he said:

"I must beg of you to pardon this intrusion, Miss Colson, but I was in the little shop opposite when you came in a moment ago. Betty has been good enough to tell me something about you, and I have come to see if there is not some way in which I can assist you."

During his speech the girl's face was a study. At first there was a certain haughtiness of expression, that faded as she recognized the perfect respectfulness of the tone, and her eyes dropped. She pulled nervously at the corner of her torn dress, and there was a certain twitching about the sweet, sensitive lips that was not lost upon Kenward.

She did not speak as soon as he had finished. She seemed to be trying to control her voice. He knew that her eyes had been full of tears when she lifted them to his, though there was not a trace of them left. The expression was dogged, sullen; but even that could not take the exquisite beauty from the singular face.

"Tain't fur myself I care—see?" she said, stolidly. "T'wouldn't make no difference if I froze or starved. But there's Lu. She ain't had nothin' to eat since yisterday, an' I put her there on the floor, and broke up the bed to keep her from freezin'. It's a-burnin' now. I sold half er the bed to the folks down-stairs fur a penny,

an' bought them pertaters; but when that's gone, Heaven knows what will become of her!"

There was not a particle of emotion in the words. They sounded senseless and stupid almost under the girl's curious manner; but Kenward understood perfectly.

As she ceased speaking, she turned her eyes upon the child, lying there on the bed with no covering about her save a thin, ragged quilt, which afforded no warmth whatever.

Chester followed her gaze, and a great lump arose in his throat. Before replying to her he took off his great, mink-lined coat, and going quickly forward, he lifted the child with the tenderness of a woman, and wrapped the garment about her.

A smile played about the stiff lips of the child as she nestled her icy cheek against the warm fur, and rising, Kenward turned to Nora, who was looking on with astonishment little short of stupidity.

"Is there a restaurant near here?" he asked, hastily.

"No nearer'n — street," she stammered.

"All right. I'll find it, and be back at once. Put all that wood on the fire, and make it as warm as you can. I'll order some coal to be sent directly from across the street. Never mind the potatoes. I'll have something to eat here as quickly as I can find a restaurant."

He felt that there was no time to lose, and putting on his hat he started for the door. He had reached it, and his hand was upon the knob before Nora seemed to realise what it was that he intended. Then, quick as a flash, she was beside him, her face quivering with gratitude—and something beside that.

"You must not go without—that!" she cried, desperately, pointing to the overcoat.

"Why?" he asked, in surprise.

"Because—because mother might come, and—

and—"

"And what?"

"And pawn it!" exclaimed the girl, fiercely, almost defiantly. "Now you know. She has pawned everything in the house for rum, till there ain't nuthin' left. She begs fur money fur Lu, and spends it before she gits home. She takes all that's give to us. I've tried to work, but what's the use? Lu can't be left here alone, and I can't do nothin' at home, when there ain't nothin' to eat, and no fire to warm my numb fingers by. I tried to sew for families as had work, but she stole the clothes and popped 'em. I took in washin', but that wa'n't no better. I got one of the children in the house to stay with Lu, and I went out; but what was there to do? Rich folks as don't know me won't have me because I ain't got no clothes; and poor ones won't, because—I be Martha Colson's child, and she is a drunkard, as some calls a—thief. Now you know. You be the first soul, except Betty, as has spoken kind to us, an'—I won't let her steal your beautiful coat. Take it with you, sir!"

"No, I won't," he said, after a little pause. "The child is getting warm. We'll risk her not getting here until my return. They would arrest her if she should try to pawn it, and she would be held until I could get to her. Don't worry. I shan't be gone long."

He gave her time to formulate no further objections, but opened the door and closed it behind him; then, with a long, curious sigh, Nora turned to her sister. She took a step forward, and tears swam in her eyes as she saw the little face half covered by the handsome fur. She tried to speak, but her voice failed her.

"Oh, Nora!" the child exclaimed, "do come under! Oh, it's lovely, and there's plenty o' room! Say, Nora, is he one o' the fairy princes that Miss White tole us about?"

Nora leaned down and looked into the little excited eyes, then kissed her sister gently.

"I reckon he must be, Lu," she answered, brokenly.

"My, but ain't he handsome! Wouldn't it be lovely, Nora, if he fell in love with you?"

"Lu!"

"Well, wouldn't it?" persisted the child.

"You are so pretty, Nora, prettier'n any o' the girls I see, and—"

"Hush!" cried Nora, more distress apparent

in her voice than there was any necessity for. "You musn't say sich a thing. I ain't nuthin' but the child uv a poor, drunken woman who's in gaol more'n she's out uv it. I'm ignerent, an' wretched, an' ugly, an' cross, an' if it wasn't fur you, Lu, I'd pray God to let me die right this minute, fur death is the only happiness in life fur me."

And to the utter astonishment of the mite upon the bed, Nora bowed her head upon the sleeve of Chester's great-coat, and wept as she had never done in her life before.

CHAPTER III.

MEANWHILE Chester was feeling, almost for the first time in his life, the same stinging, numbing sensation of cold that the poor feel.

Perhaps he was even more sensitive under it than they are as a general thing, being so unaccustomed, and he felt the wind in all its force, for he had left even his gloves in the pocket of his coat. He did not shrink under it, however, but crossed the street again to Betty's little shop.

"I want you to send over some coal at once to Miss Colson; that basketful will do at present," he said to the kind-hearted woman. "And—you will understand better than I what are the wants of those two poor little half-frozen creatures whom I sent here to you. Here is a sovereign for each of them. May I trust you to help me?"

"That may ye, sir, Heaven rist yer soul! May the blissid—"

But Chester did not wait for the finishing of the pious wish. He waved his hand and smiled to the good woman, then made his way as fast as he could.

He walked rapidly, but that did not keep the piercing cold out of his bones; and it was with a feeling that approached partial paralysis from numbness that he entered the restaurant at last. Many people looked at him askance as he passed along in his high hat, without overcoat of any kind, and it is doubtful if a "hot Scotch" had ever tasted so good to him as it did when he reached that little restaurant.

Plenty of hot and nourishing food, and even some that was not quite so nourishing, but more palatable, was ordered and paid for, also a servant to have it taken at once and served in the room to which Kenward directed; then, with a little shiver at the thought of facing the cold air again, and buttoning his coat as tightly as he could over his chest, he went out.

It had all taken time, though not much, and when he again returned to that little, almost empty chamber, he found that Mrs. Colson had not returned, but that Nora had obeyed his instructions, and there was as hot a fire in the little stove as the broken thing could accommodate.

Lu had not removed even ever so little of the coat, but was lying with her cheek against the fur, contentedly.

"I'm afraid you most froze, sir," said Nora, as she saw the evidences of frost in his cheeks. "I shouldn't let you a-done it."

"I don't know how you could well have helped it," said Chester, with a laugh. "It is warmer in here already, and there will be something to eat along in a minute. Well, little Lu, do you feel more comfortable?"

He went to the bed and knelt down upon the floor to look at the child. He saw that she was excited, and her bright, elfish eyes danced as they met his own.

"Yes," she said, almost shrilly. "Did Heaven send you here to make folks comfo'ble? Nora says you be a fairy prince out o' a book like Miss White read us about. Do fairy princes always wear fur coats and make folks comfo'ble?"

"I believe they are supposed to, Miss Lu, and they ride in chariots drawn by gnats instead of horses. Do you think I could ride in a chariot drawn by gnats?"

She saw that he was laughing. It was an unusual sensation to Lu to see anyone laugh, and she lifted her head a trifle higher from the covering of the coat. He could see then clearly how like her beautiful sister she was.

"You're too big, ain't yer?" she said, referring to the chariot and gnats. "But they don't all ride like that, do they?"

"I think all fairies do. But tell me, little one, what is the matter with you? What makes you ill? If I am a fairy, it may be that I can cure you."

He rose as he spoke and seated himself upon the broken chair. Nora leaned against the wall and looked down upon them. He had never seen greater tenderness than filled her eyes as she stood there looking at Lu, and he saw that she had been weeping as her gaze turned to him.

"There is somethin' the matter with her hip, sir," Nora answered, "and she can't walk."

"Has she been so from birth?"

"No, sir; it came gradual like."

"And she has had medical attention?"

"What, her?"

"Yes."

An almost cruel sneer crossed the girl's beautiful lips.

"Where would sich as her git medical attention? She ain't never seen a doctor since she was born, I don't think. A lady gimme a bottle o' stuff, an' I rubs her hip with that when it gits bad. It's most gone now."

Chester shivered. It was worse than the cold to him.

He opened the door himself in response to a knock, and found the waiter with the tray of food he had ordered. He took the tray and placed it on the little rickety table himself, and he sent the man upon an errand in order to get him out of the room while the girls eat.

His presence did not keep them from fully satisfying their appetites, for they apparently forgot him for the time, the sight of the food alone inducing Lu to allow the fur coat to fall from around her.

And then, when the meal was over, the remnants put carefully aside by Nora, and the waiter had taken away the tray, Kenward sat down again.

"And now, Miss Colson," he said, with that respectful manner that is so sweet to the girl who is unaccustomed to it, "let us talk about the future. We must think of something to better your condition."

The old, sullen look returned to the girl's face at once.

"Tain't no use!" she exclaimed, dully. "There ain't nothin' else for us—Lu an' me—but jist this. We've got to starve and freeze. That's what we was born fur. If you got me a place, she would take all I made. She would come here an' disgrace me, so that I would be sent away. Nobody would keep me. 'Tain't no kind o' use, sir. You're very good. You've brung more light and happiness into our lives this day than Lu an' I ever thought to have here, an' we both thank, and will ask Heaven to bless you. And that is all, sir."

"But it is not all!" cried Kenward, firmly.

"Lu says that I am the fairy prince, and I mean to verify her opinion of me. I have been thinking it all over while you two have been eating. What is the good of wasting your lives with this woman, who simply deprives you of all there is in life? Why don't you escape her?"

"How?" asked Nora, breathlessly.

"Run away."

"Where?"

"Why, right here in town. I can arrange it for you so that she need never find you. I can get employment for you by which you can support yourself nicely, and take good care of Lu. There need be no more such suffering for either of you."

He waited for a moment for Nora to reply. Her head was bent, and she seemed to be thinking deeply. At first she had been radiant under the suggestion; but the expression did not linger. She raised her head at last, and shook it slowly.

"No; I won't do it," she said, dully. "She ain't allurs been like this. She is kind to us sometimes, an' it is only the drink that makes her what she is. She loves Lu, and sometimes she loves me, an' it would break her heart to come home an' not find us. She ain't allurs been like this, an' it's the trouble as has drove her to

it. I can't bring no more on her, sir. Why, I believe she would kill herself!"

There was something in the tone that touched Chester. He could not have told that unhappy child that suicide would have been a happy fate for her mother. To save his life he could not help admiring the girl who had refused to desert her parent, let the circumstances be what they would; but he did make another appeal.

"But you have Lu to think of, Miss Colson," he exclaimed. "Is that nothing? You would be able to get a physician for her, and she would, perhaps, get entirely well. You would be always warm, and well fed, and happy. You would—"

"But she wouldn't! She would be still cold and hungry—or dead! No—with a shiver—she ain't fit to die, an' I can't do it. She wa'n't allurs like this, sir, an' I have that time to think uv. I remember her when she was so pretty, an' so good; but the trouble came, and she ain't never been the same since. But fur all that, she loves us in her own way, and we would be worse than animals to desert her. I can't do it, sir; I can't!"

There were tears in the girl's eyes, but they never fell, for the door had opened, and a boy, as ragged, and cold, and hungry looking as she had been an hour before, sprang into the room.

"Nora!" he cried, then, seeing she was not alone, he shrunk back.

"What is it?" she asked, going up to him.

"What is it, Ned?"

The boy did not speak aloud, but the dramatic whisper was as clearly audible to Kenward as to Nora, as Ned said:

"She's done it this time; she made a awful row in the streets last night, and the jedge has give her six months. Don't look like that, Nora—don't! I thought you'd be glad—I did, honour bright—er I wouldn't a-come to tell you. Nora! Nora! Oh, sir, look at her!"

CHAPTER IV.

A GREENISH pallor had settled over the face of the unfortunate girl. She staggered, but before Chester had time to reach her she had recovered herself, and passing her hand before her eyes, she said huskily to Ned:—

"There ain't nothin' the matter. I'm all right. See? But are you sure uv what you said? Ain't there no mistake? Six months! It can't be true!"

"'Tis, though. I was there. Bill Murphy, the cop, tole me as she was arrested! 'Las' night, an' I jist went widout tellin' you. I says, says I, 'Tain't no use in a-botherin' Nora about it till I know; and I heard the jedge say to her, says he, 'Martha Colson, you be a ole fender. You been up befo' me 'bout twenty times, an' I ain't never give you mor'n ten days, but this time I'm a-goin' to give you time to come to yer senses. It's six months' hard labour, Martha, an' I hopes as how you'll come out a different woman, fur yer children's sake.' I stayed until she was put into the Black Maria, then I run off here to tell you; but I didn't think you'd be sorry, Nora, indeed, I didn't. When my dad was sent up, mother said, 'Thank Heaven fur that much, an' I thought you'd say the same.'

Ned was looking at her earnestly, apparently forgetful of the presence of a strange gentleman, and glancing from him to Nora, Kenward saw her try to force a faint smile to her lips.

"You done right to come an' tell me, Ned," she said tremulously, "an' I thank you; but—"

And then the voice broke. The girl tried to control herself, but it was a useless effort. She stood there for a moment, struggling against her tears, then she turned and flung herself upon the straw pile beside little Lu, and with her arms around the child's neck, she wept bitterly.

Chester felt that that first proxym of grief for a mother's downfall, no matter how unworthy that mother might be, was too sacred for other eyes, and opening the door quietly, he drew Ned into the passage.

"You are sure there can be no mistake?" he asked.

"No, there ain't," answered Ned firmly. "Lor, sir, don't you let it worry you. It's the best thing as could a happened to Nora and Lu. I ain't a-goin' to see 'em suffer, sir."

"You are not! Have you got money?"
"Oh, I makes money. I shines boots, and sells papers, and carries bundles. Why, sometimes I makes as much as seventeen shillings a week. I couldn't do nothin' for Nora and Lu when their mother was here, fur she jis' got 'old uv it, an' it never done them no good. But I kin help a heap now."

"You are fond of Nora, then?"
"Fond of her?" queried the boy, lifting his eyes curiously. "Does that mean do I like her? You bet! There ain't no better girl'n Nora. She's so different from the other folks round here. She don't seem like them. You don't never hear Nora swear. There ain't nuthin' but good in her. An' it's the same way with Lu, poor little thing! There ain't nuthin' I wouldn't do fur her."

"But you have your mother to take care of, haven't you?"

"Yes; but 'tain't many boys as makes as much money as I do. I ain't afraid. I got a little sister, too, jis' two days old, an' father's up fur four months. He ain't seen the baby. Say! Listen to Nora a-cryin'! I ain't never heard her cry like that before in my life. I can't stand it, sir. Lemme go in there an' tell her I'll take care uv her, and not to worry."

Ned looked almost pleadingly into the handsome face above him, and Kenward, thinking that Nora had had sufficiently long indulgence, nodded a consent into the brave little eyes.

The boy opened the door at once and entered, while Kenward followed him. He did not interfere, but watched Ned, as he paused for a moment in the centre of the floor, as if timidity in presence of that sorrow chained him; then he approached nearer, and placed his hand upon the elder girl's shoulder.

"Come, Nora!" he exclaimed, bravely; "don't take on like that. Brace up, old girl! This ain't like you. 'Where's all your pluck? Ef I tole this to the boys they wouldn't believe it. There ain't nothing a-goin' to happen to you an' Lu, Nora. I'll take care uv you, I will, an' you know Ned never broke his word in his life when he said that. Brace up, Nora! Ain't you got no style about yer?"

The sound of the kindly voice seemed to open the flood-gates all the wider, for a moment, and Nora wept more violently than ever, but only for a very little while. Then she sat up and wiped her eyes with the corner of her dress.

"I don't know what made me do that," she said, bitterly. "I've had a heap harder things to bear, an' I never done it before. It's been a long time since I was a baby."

"Everybody has to be a baby once in a while!" exclaimed Ned, cheerfully. "You're all right now. Why, you'll be a heap better off, ole girl. I'll take care uv you."

"And do you think I would touch a penny uv your money?" asked the girl, miserably. "You are too good to us, Ned. You work hard fur your money, an' yer mother needs it. Don't trouble about us. Lu an' me will git along somehow."

Chester stood there listening intently. It seemed an extraordinary thing to hear those children, so poor that neither of them had enough to eat, talking to each other in that way. It seemed to him that it was the most beautiful charity he had ever witnessed, and he could not decide for whom his admiration was greatest—for the boy, earning sometimes seventeen shillings a week, with a mother and baby sister to support, and who was yet willing to share the pittance with the helpless girls; or for that suffering, starving creature, half child, half woman, who had strength to refuse it.

There were tears in his eyes as he stepped forward and placed his hand kindly upon Ned's head.

"I don't like to be overlooked, little man," he said, gently; "and yet I am but too evidently forgotten here. I have plenty of money. Do you think that there is nothing that I can do?"

Ned looked up in surprise. There was not a trace of fear in his face as he answered,—

"Rich folks don't do much good for poor ones, sir, generally. They give 'em a ton o' coal. They may pay the back rent, and they send in something from the grocery, and may be some warm clothes; but that ain't what the poor wants most. The coal burns up, and the grub's eat up, and the clothes wear out, and ye ain't no better'n ye was before. It ain't that as poor folks wants. It's work. It ain't work fur one day, nor fur two. It's work where ye can make a livin', so as you can have coal, an' grub, and clothes all the time. Ef you have plenty one day and starve the next, it only makes it all the harder, an' that's the way as rich folks help us."

Kenward did not reply at once. The truth of the statement was but too apparent, in so far as his own case was concerned. His charities had certainly been conducted upon that basis. He had given without bothering his head as to the future of the applicant, and now he realized it all, for "out of the mouths of babes and sucklings" he had heard the truth at last.

He felt half abashed as he spoke again.

"That is not the kind of charity I am going to offer you, little man. It is not charity at all, but simply a means by which you can earn your own living, and by which Miss Colson can earn hers."

"You will do that, sir?" cried Ned, eagerly. "You needn't bother 'bout me, 'cause I don't need it; but Lu does. There's Lu, sir, as must be looked after; but if you can get Nora somethin' Lu could stay with my mother while she's busy."

"Little Lu shall be taken care of also," answered Kenward, leaning forward to pat the child's cheek. We are going to make her strong and well, so that when Miss Lu is old enough to take care of herself, she can do so without assistance from anyone. Will you trust the fairy prince, Mistress Lu?"

"Yes, sir," answered the child, timidly. "But you mustn't make Nora cry any more."

Kenward turned suddenly and looked at the girl.

What was there in the words of the child that had startled him? They were simple enough, and yet to him there seemed to be some awful meaning underlying them.

For the time being he had forgotten the wonderful beauty of the elder girl, but under those words of the child it had come back upon him with renewed force, and he looked at her almost as if he had never seen her before.

How strange and unique her beauty was! How like something from another world she seemed as she stood there with the tears still wet upon her cheeks, and the corner of her ragged dress still in her hand.

Should he ever make her cry again?

A sudden weakness oppressed him, and a film came before his eyes. For a moment the temptation was upon him to leave her there to Ned's care, as the safer plan for her soul's salvation; and then her beauty filled and thrilled him anew. He did not understand this new emotion that had never entered his soul before; but he bent and kissed the little soiled face that still rested upon the fur of his coat.

"No, Lu," he said, gently. "Heaven helping me, I will never make Nora cry again!"

The words sank deep in the child's heart, and she remembered them to use in the sorrowful aftertime.

CHAPTER V.

The task which Kenward Chester had set himself was by no means an easy one. It seemed to him at first that he had taken a veritable white elephant upon his hands; but he was not a man to shrink from anything which he had once undertaken.

The words of the child, Lu, upon that momentous morning, had lingered with him with curious pertinacity. It irritated him with himself, and yet they occurred to him again and again with extraordinary insistence.

"You must not make Nora cry any more."

They were simple, childish words, and yet there seemed some fateful warning in them to him. He heard them in his dreams, and they haunted him continually.

In consequence, he was, perhaps, a little less kind to Nora than he might have been under other circumstances. Not that he was unkind to her. That possibility was not in his nature, but there was a certain reserve when he spoke to her, a restraint in his manner that was not there when he bent over Lu. It even influenced him somewhat in his selection of an apartment for them.

He chose one that was plainer and less expensive than he would have done otherwise, and in purchasing the clothing that was necessary for their altered station, and for their comfort, he chose simple, almost homely raiment for her, while for Lu, there were many little extra things that her illness made unnecessary and unprofitable.

He selected two rooms, neither of them large, and certainly not luxurious, in an unfashionable part of the town for them. They were warm and well ventilated, however, and the food promised to be good and wholesome. He purchased a few extras, such as a comfortable chair for—anybody that chose to use it, and a couch for Lu. As for the rest, he set his lips grimly—and let it go as it was.

To him it was miserable, and he hated himself for his penuriousness, but to Nora and Lu it was the personification of comfort and elegance.

He did not even ask the opinion of the elder girl upon it, but with a smile in his eyes, that was not quite as mirthful as it had been upon the first day of their acquaintance, he turned to the child.

"Well, little Lu," he exclaimed, "do you think you can be comfortable here?"

"It's beautiful!" she cried, with delight. "We can be comfortabler here than up in heaven, I think. What makes you so good to us, sir?"

Kenward started.

He had been looking at her almost unconsciously, tracing the growing resemblance between her and her beautiful sister, and again her childish words struck him with a force that had brought the sudden colour to his cheeks.

Why was he so good to them? Why had he not selected some of those other poor creatures whom he had met down there near Betty's shop, to share his charity? Why was it that all the rest seemed of so little interest to him compared with these girls, of whom, it seemed to him, he had thought every hour of his life since that first meeting?

He put the self-interrogation from him almost angrily. There was no reason, he told himself, except that he was sorry for them, and that they were helpless.

He did not reply to the child, but hastily turned to Ned, whom he had invited to inspect the new rooms, after making him the almost unwilling recipient of a better suit of clothes than the boy had ever hoped to possess.

"Do you think it will answer all purposes, Ned?" he asked, half sternly.

"It's scrumptious!" exclaimed the boy. "You're a brick, sir, ef you don't mind a feller sayin' so. It all seems better to me 'n a play I seen onct. My eye! But ain't you turned into a swell, Nora!"

Kenward listened intently for a reply, but, strangely enough, he did not look at her. He did not look at her any oftener than he could help now, though he was scarcely conscious of the fact himself. He heard the trace of unshed tears in the girl's sweet voice, clearly enough however, as she said,—

"I'm afraid it's all a dream. It can't be true, it don't seem. There ain't never nobody cared what become of Lu an' me fur so long that this don't seem possible, an' yet I know I ain't asleep. It's all here, an' I'm here, an' Lu is here, but—but—I don't want you to think I ain't grateful, sir. I wouldn't have you think that fur nothin' in all the world. You have been so good—so good! But there's jis' this,—I can't—we can't—take it all fur nothin' fur all the time! An' it must cost a awful lot! You seem to know every—

thing, sir, an' I trust you—you musn't think I don't. But are you sure I can pay fur it? Are you sure—

"Nonsense," said Chester, almost brusquely. "It only costs thirty shillings a week with board included."

"Thirty shillings!" gasped Nora,—"thirty shillings! Why, that—"

"Is very cheap, indeed. You don't think people give you your board, rooms, and fuel for nothing, do you?"

"Somebody's a givin' it to me for nothin', now," answered Nora, meekly. "I ain't got nothin' to pay fur it with."

"But you will have, and you are to pay it back, every penny of it. Not right at once, you understand, but by degrees. I'll have that all settled in a day or two. By the way, Ned, don't you think it might be a good scheme to have a lady I know come here every afternoon for a couple of hours and teach—Lu? She is a rich lady who does those things—well, because she likes to do it, and she doesn't charge anything. You might run in yourself at the time she is teaching Lu, and profit by the lessons. How does it strike you?"

The boy's eyes sparkled, and if Kenward's conscience hurt him about the lie he had told, it was quickly quieted.

"Grand!" exclaimed the boy. "An' Nora can listen, too. Can't you, Nora? Oh, that's a rum go! My! but you seem to think of everything, sir. There ain't nothin' like an eddication, sir; an' when a boy really wants to learn, he can do a mighty lot in a little while."

"All right. I'll tell the lady that she can come here every day. You can fix the hour when it will suit you best to get off from your work, Ned, and she will come then."

"I ain't been so happy since the day I heard dad had gone up fur four months!" exclaimed Ned. "That don't sound pretty, but truth often don't. I'm only afraid uv wakin' up an' a-findin' it all a dream."

"Just try to think that it is the dead past that is the dream, my boy, and that you are awake now in a much happier future. How are you feeling, Miss Lu?"

"Awful good!"

"Your hip does not hurt after your drive up-ton?"

"Not a bit."

"You are quite sure?"

"Sure."

Kenward turned and looked at Nora. She was standing leaning against the bureau, looking straight at him, her face paler than usual, and her eyes, it seemed to him, a trifle darker. He flushed as he met her clear gaze, but she neither stirred nor changed colour. He thought her at that moment the most exquisite piece of humanity that he had ever seen, and his voice was not so steady as usual as he said,—

"Do you think, Miss Colson, that if she rested for a few hours, that another ride this evening would hurt her?"

"Another ride?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps you might all like to see something of the world, and I—well, that I would take you down to the theatre this evening. I can arrange it so that she will be quite comfortable after you get there; but if you think the drive would be too much for her—"

"Oh, but it wouldn't!" cut in Lu, shrilly, her eyes sparkling with delight. "please it wouldn't tire me one bit. Do lemme go! I was never in a theatre in all my life, an' neither was Nora. Oh, sir, I won't be tired! Indeed I won't."

Kenward smiled into the little eager face as he asked of her sister,

"What do you say, Miss Colson?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Nora. "Maybe—"

"Maybe it would not hurt her, if she were carried carefully to the carriage and back again. Well, what do you say, Ned? Shall we try it? And will you be one of the party?"

"I don't think it *could* hurt her sir, an'—well, that's one word fur her an' two fur me," exclaimed the boy, with a merry grin. "I'd rather go than eat."

"All right, then; that's settled. I can't go with you, but I'll send a man whom I can trust

to look out for you and see that everything is arranged properly."

"What theatre, sir?" asked Ned.

"At the Royal."

"The Royal," echoed Ned. "Why that's the finest theatre going."

"Isn't that the one you want to see?"

"Why, course," grinned Ned. "There ain't nothing mean about me."

"I thought you might like it because—well, because I am going to play there to-night."

"You? Be you an actor?"

"Yes."

"Golly! You ain't really, are you?"

The boy's expression had suddenly undergone a great change. Chester had ceased to be a real personage to him, but had become like one of the gods of old was to the Gauls who worshipped them.

"Yes, I am really," answered Kenward, just a trifle annoyed, though he could not have told why. "I must go now. Be all ready by half-past seven, when the man will call for you. Ned, you stay to dinner with the girls, and take care of them. Good-bye. I will see you after the play is over."

He patted Lu's cheek, nodded to the others, and was gone.

Ned fell into a chair and rolled his eyes up dramatically.

"A actor!" he exclaimed; "an' here I jis' been a treating him like he wasn't nothin' but a rich man! An' we a-going to see him act! My! Lissen, Nora, while I tell you what you'll see."

CHAPTER VI.

THE visit to the theatre was the very greatest possible success. To Ned's increased surprise, Mr. Chester had had a box prepared for them, a steamer-chair doing service for Lu in such luxury as she had never dreamed of. It was drawn well to the front of the box, which was draped with curtains, so that it was seen but little from the auditorium, and yet a perfect view of the stage was obtained.

Ned's face was resplendent under an ample polish of soap and water; but neither cleanliness nor exercise could ever have imparted that colour to his cheeks, or have set that dancing light to work in his eyes.

Lu, too, while her face was still pale, showed traces of excitement in the brilliancy of her eyes, but the only evidence Nora gave was a steadiness that almost approached stoicism. She was like an exquisite piece of Parian marble, her countenance almost stony in its immovable calmness. And how superbly beautiful she was! She wore a plain, cheap gown of simple, almost rigid cut, black in colour, with only a stiff linen collar at her throat, and yet there was a ripple of admiration through the house as they caught a glimpse of her before Chester's valet had placed her at the side of Lu's chair. The man showed Ned from what point he would obtain the best view of the stage, and then he left them there, telling them not to leave the box, after the play, until he had come for them.

"My stars," whispered Ned to Nora, when they had been left alone. "Have you any idea what this costs?"

She shook her head.

"More'n I could earn in a month. Do y' see that bloke across there?"

"Yes."

"That's the Vanderbilt. He's got so much money that he couldn't tell you hisself in a week how much it comes to, an' we is fixed just as good as he."

"I said he was a fairy prince!" exclaimed Lu, triumphantly, referring to Kenward.

"Fairy prince!" cried Ned, in disgust. "A fairy prince ain't in it wid him! Why, he's a actor! You jis' wait!"

There was nothing else for them to do but follow the advice that Ned had given, and wait; but it was not difficult to do. There was so much to be seen that neither of them had ever seen before, or had ever dreamed of, that time did not drag to them.

The lights and dresses, and Lu's of happy voices, and music, would have been sufficient for one evening without the play; but at last, when the curtain did go up, and the dainty white and gold setting of a modern drawing room was disclosed to their excited visions, it was almost too much, and even Nora, at eighteen years of age, could scarcely bring herself to believe that she was not in the land where the fairies dwell. The women were angels, and the men gods to both, and as the play progressed, Ned found it necessary more than once to warn them that it was not real, but only "play-acting."

Do you remember the first play that you ever saw, you who are following this story of the eventful life of Nora Colson? I do. I was only eight years old, and the play was "East Lynne," and my heart ached for the misery of the suffering heroine, not as it does now by reflected sorrow, so to speak, but with a poignancy that made me for a time one of the real actors of the real drama, and not a sympathetic witness. I understood it all, and the bitterness in my baby soul kept pace with that of Madame Vine. The glamour of reality was in every tear that was shed, to me, and in every word that was spoken, and the fascination of the theatre went out of my life to a very great extent when I brought myself to realize that it was not all truth upon which I looked.

And so it was with Lu and Nora, for the elder girl was as much a child as the younger, on that first evening at the theatre. It would be impossible to describe it, but if it had not been for the happiness that was restored at the end of the play, it is doubtful if either of them would have gone to sleep that night.

And Kenward? It seemed to them impossible that they could ever have known him, that they could ever have touched his hand and spoken his name. Lu recalled how he had kissed her upon the brow, and the spot that his lips had touched seemed sacred to her; while Nora held her breath curiously, her heart trembling in a way that seemed to threaten suffocation.

He was the hero of the play, and to the mind of that unsophisticated girl he was lifted entirely beyond the plane of the mortal and became a god. She felt a sort of glow and enthusiasm born in her soul that she could not quite fathom. He had taken an entirely different place in her life from the one which he had filled only that morning. She worshipped him. Not as a man, but as something immortal, spiritual, divine. She would have felt as the *religieuse* does in the desecration of an idol, if she had touched him. He was apart from the world to her, and she felt humbled and pitiful as she thought of him.

She took Lu in her arms gently when she had crept into the bed beside her—that bed which he had provided for her—and listened to the regular breathing of the child, which she thought indicated sleep; but Lu was not so soon to close her mental sight upon that first night of wonderful experiences, as was proven a few minutes later by her uttering a little, half-hysterical laugh.

"And to think, Nora," she said, "that I should have said it would be nice for him to fall in love with you!"

The elder girl started violently.

"Hush!" she whispered almost sternly. "I told ye not t'say that again. It's—it's wicked! It's an awful sin!"

"I know it is—now."

And, somehow, the answer brought a sigh into the soul of Nora that welled up with an agony that was like physical pain in its intensity. She tried to put it from her, but it would have been as easy for her to control the throbbings of her own mad heart.

She was even paler than before the following day, when Chester came to the house; but he did not comment upon it. He leaned over the wondering Lu and patted her cheek with the same kindness that he had shown the day previous, and the place his hand had touched became hallowed to her.

"Well, Miss Lu," he exclaimed merrily, "how did you like the play?"

"It was grand!" she answered breathlessly.

"Ned said it wasn't true; but it was, wasn't it, sir?"

Kenward laughed.

"No, child," he answered. "Ned was quite right. The same truth cannot happen night after night, you know; and if you don't believe this does, you shall go again to-night and hear the same words spoken, see the people stand in the same places that they did last night, hear the same laughter, and see the same tears. No, it's all a fraud, little one, but a very entertaining one, and the people like it. Were you pleased, Miss Colson?"

"I can't tell you, sir," she answered, in a low tone; "I don't know. I lived it all night, and it's there again to-day. It was a glimpse into heaven to us, sir."

She was standing beside the closed window, looking up into the clear blue vault as she spoke, with her profile toward Kenward. He looked at her, and her beauty struck him anew, as it seemed to do every time he saw her. There was something so still and cold in her face that it reminded him of an exquisite, perfect moonlight; and yet he knew that her expression contained capabilities of passion that was thrilling, for he had seen it.

He almost forgot what it was that he intended to say to her, in his interested study of her remarkable beauty; but it came back to him suddenly with a repugnance that he could not quite understand. The day before it had seemed to him the only prospect for her, and now the thought was hateful to him. He had about concluded that he would say nothing to her upon the subject for which express purpose he had made his visit that day, and then he pulled himself up with a sudden mental jerk.

"I am a fool!" he said to himself. "What is the matter with me?"

And then, aloud, in a voice that was almost cold under the restraint that he was putting upon his emotions, he said,—

"How would you like to go upon the stage, Miss Colson?"

"Me!" she cried. And then she smiled. "Oh, sir, at first I thought you meant it!"

"I did mean it! I do mean it! How would you like it, Miss Colson?"

"How would I like to be a queen, or any other impossible thing?" she asked. "I couldn't! What should a thing like me know of such as that?"

"Never mind about that. It is not such a heaven as you seem to imagine. Did you never hear that the devil's palace is as much gilded and that it shines as brightly as if it were real gold?"

She did not reply, and he continued,—

"Of course you could not have a speaking part just at first; but I can arrange it so that you can at least make a living out of it. Then, if you show any talent, it may be a great thing for you eventually. Do you agree?"

"Me—agree!"

"All right, then. There is a new piece going on soon. They need some extra ladies, and you can get used to the footlights in that way. In the meantime, I am going to send the lady to see Lu, of whom I spoke yesterday. She is the teacher. I should advise you to study as hard as you can between now and the time that the new play is put in rehearsal. I may count upon you?"

"Yes."

The word was little more than a breath, but the life was settled.

CHAPTER VII.

A MONTH passed quickly, even merrily, to Nora and Lu. There was hard work done, and plenty of it; but both the girls seemed absolutely to revel in it, and at the end of the brief thirty days there had been progress made that would have been astonishing to the sluggard of the public schools.

Nora knew how to read and write with comparative ease, but during that month she took rapid strides forward. Her grammar had im-

proved, the tough accent had disappeared from her speech, and there was no longer that strange contradiction between her appearance and her manner.

The lady whom Kenward had engaged to teach them was one whom he had known under happier circumstances. She was indeed a lady, and the position that he had accorded her was of great assistance, while neither her pride nor dignity suffered under the charity. He told her frankly of the harmless deception that he had practised upon the children, and she consented to carry it out, in order that they might not feel the obligation to Kenward, which he was so anxious to avoid.

Ned was with them every day, and while his association with newboys was rather detrimental to the influence his teacher was desirous of throwing round him, still his improvement was wonderful, while not exactly so marked as that of his girl friends.

And Lu was making rapid strides toward physical development also. Good and regular food were telling their welcome story in both countenances; and while the child could not walk or even leave her couch without assistance, the physician whom Kenward had engaged for her gave promise of future improvement that was rich in hope to Nora.

The busy life gave the elder girl little time for thought at the beginning of the month, but as it gradually neared the end she began to grow restive under the debt that was accumulating; for she insisted upon keeping a strict account of every penny that Kenward expended upon them, in so far as she knew of it.

Their teacher had gone, and she was sitting beside the window looking into the street, when she heard the knock at the door that she had grown to know so well. The swift colour mounted to her brow as she bid the applicant enter. She knew whom she should see, and yet she started foolishly as her eyes met Kenward's.

He nodded to her pleasantly, and, as usual, advanced to kiss little Lu.

"How's my little girl to-day?" he asked, gently. "Growing well and strong as she is happy?"

"Yes, I am happy now that you have come," she answered. "But where have you been? It is almost a week since we have seen you, and Nora and I have been so lonely! It is naughty of you to stay like that."

Kenward smiled and coloured faintly.

"You have missed me?"

"Dreadfully! I wish I knew of some way to punish you."

"Lu!" exclaimed Nora, reprovingly. "You should not presume—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Chester. "She shall punish me if she likes; but I am going to beg off this time, Miss Lu, by promising not to do it again. I have been punished sufficiently in that I have not seen you."

(To be continued.)

A HEAVY BURDEN.

—:—

(Continued from page 273.)

"And that is what I am most anxious for," said the young Earl, gravely. "Mr. Verity, my aunt won't believe me, but it is my firm intention never to marry, and I don't want to think that when I am gone one of the Australian Denes will reign at Wilmshurst, and my own brother be defrauded of his rights."

Mr. Verity went down to Kesterton himself. The old clergyman and the no less aged parish clerk had both held their posts for thirty years, and both remembered perfectly the wedding of the handsome artist with the innkeeper's pretty daughter.

"It is strange you should have come to me," said Mr. Jackson, thoughtfully; "in turning over my desk last week I came upon a letter I

received from Mr. Dene. His marriage had turned out very unhappily, and he and his wife had agreed to part. He seemed alarmed lest the legitimacy of his son should ever be called in question, and enclosed me a sealed packet which he begged me to hand to the boy if ever he came to Kesterton to make inquiries about his parents. So many years had passed I was thinking of destroying the letter and its enclosure; I am thankful now I did not."

Basil Verity carried the letters and papers home to King's Crofton, and found ample proof to establish Paul Ashton's claims as Lord Wilmshurst's second son.

"I see I am to lose my partner," he said, kindly to Paul that evening, "but I congratulate you heartily on your good fortune. You have carried a heavy burden, and carried it nobly too."

But Paul refused to dissolve the partnership. He said he was not made for an idle man. Lady Maria had transferred to his name the remainder of the trust money which, with its interest and compound interest came to a goodly sum, but Paul shrank from settling down with nothing to do, and wished at any rate for the present to continue in his profession.

"Only he must have three months' holiday first," put in Lord Wilmshurst. "I want him to come down to Dene and make acquaintance with our old homestead."

One painful thing had to be gone through before Paul left King's Crofton, he went to Glen Rosa to see his mother. Mrs. Ashton received him coldly, showed no pleasure in his prospects, and told him plainly she did not care what became of him.

"The two I loved have been taken from me, and I shall not be long after them. I never cared for you, you were the son of a man I hated and despised. You had a bright future while my Mildred was doomed to a terrible fate. If I could have bartered your life for hers I would have done it gladly."

There was no use in remaining. Paul never saw his mother again. She went down to Berkshire and took lodgings close to the Asylum, so as to be near her husband. The malady from which she suffered carried her off in a few months' time, and, by a strange coincidence, the poor lunatic she had loved so passionately died the same day.

Paul won golden opinions from everyone at Dene, and so fascinated Mr. and Mrs. Lorraine that they raised no objections to his wish to carry off Dorothy, and as Dolly returned his affection and desired no fairer fate than to be the Honourable Mrs. Dene, in the sweet summer time there was a wedding in the village church which gave to Lady Maria her long cherished desire to have Dolly for her niece.

Mr. and Mrs. Dene took Woodcote on a long lease, and there several little ones arrived to bless their union, and comfort Lady Maria by robbing the Australian Denes of all chance of the Wilmshurst property. The old lady is devoted to Dolly's children, and now holds Paul but little less dear than her beloved Noel.

Noel is still a bachelor, and rarely at home. He has a great love of travel and goes to far distant climes in search of "big game." Lady Maria knows the truth now. In early manhood he loved and loved in vain, since death robbed him of his bride. Few men are capable of a life-long fidelity to the dead, but Noel is one of them. He will go down to the grave unmarried, and his title and honours will devolve on the half-brother who once bore so bravely A HEAVY BURDEN.

[THE END.]

A CUSTOM that has existed for four centuries is still maintained in some towns on the Lower Rhine. On Easter Monday—auction day—the town crier or clerk calls all the young people together, and to the highest bidder sells the privilege of dancing with the chosen girl, and her only, during the entire year. The fees flow into the public poor-box.

FACETIE.

"OFT in the stilly night"—Meow.

ARE tennis maidens all for lawn?

A COUNTER-IRRITANT—The tardy saleswoman.

THERE is more fabulous wealth than there is of any other kind.

LANTERN-JAWED people can't always throw light on the subject.

WHY must logic have legs? Because it stands to reason.

"HOW are you getting on with your bicycle-riding, Dick?" Dick—"I spend most of my time getting on."

THE fellow who asked for a lock of his girl's hair was informed that "it costs money, hair does."

TEACHER: "Where do the largest strawberries come from?" Bobby: "From the top of the baskets, sir."

HUSBAND: "Didn't you promise to obey me at the altar?" Wife: "Yes; but we're not there now."

"IT's a wise monarch," said the man who abdicated a precarious throne, "who knows enough to come in out of the reign."

"MY name is a very prosaic one—Miller!" Mature Maiden: "Not at all. I only wish it was mine."

"I NEVER destroy a receipted bill, do you?" said Bunting to Gilley. "I don't think I ever saw one," replied Gilley.

SHE: "Don't you think his manners are very easy?" He: "Very, very. Admirably adapted for beginners."

HELEN: "Why did you ask that Smith girl to marry you instead of asking me?" Blazer: "Because I knew she would refuse me."

A FAITHFUL FRIEND: "What sort of a fellow is he?" "He's a friend who would be willing to share your last shilling with you."

SHE: "I will never marry a man whose fortune has not at least five ciphers in it." He (triumphantly): "Oh, darling, mine is all ciphers!"

MAMMA: "And how was the bride dressed, Ethel darling?" E. (with larder experiences): "Oh, beautifully; but she was covered with muslin, and I didn't notice any flies on her."

COOK: "Which will you 'ave, Robert, some cold mutton, or some cold rabbit pie?" Policeman: "Well, darlin', I shouldn't like to make either of 'em jealous, so I'll 'ave both."

SCRIBBLER (timidly): "Have you any opening here for an intellectual writer?" Editor (briskly): "Yes, sir, the door, unless you prefer the window."

AN old gentleman, on being asked by a cabman for two shillings when the proper charge was eightpence, remarked very gravely, "No, I don't want to buy your horse."

TARDY arrival at a dinner party: "I'm afraid I am too late, dear Mrs. Smith." Mrs. Smith (effusively): "Oh, my dear, you could never come too late!"

FIRST citizen: "How is it that so many Londoners fight shy of home rule?" Second ditto: "I fancy it is because it begins with the letter h."

MRS. HARRIS (newspaper in hand): "A movement is on foot to make medicine cheaper." Harris: "Good! That will bring sickness within reach of all."

"ARE you aware," said the man in the rear, "that your umbrella is poking me in the eye?" "It isn't my umbrella," replied the man in front, with equal firmness; "it's a borrowed one, sir."

OLD LADY: "Oh, I always get so nervous on a railroad. Don't you think we're going at an awful rate?" Mr. Illuck: "Y-e-s, but you needn't worry, mum; there won't be any accident." "How do you know there won't?" "Cause I've got an accident insurance ticket."

GRIGGS: "Do you see that man over there? He is an ex-M.P." Briggs: "You don't say so. He's a respectable-looking man, too. Is he trying to reform?"

"SO he has been elected a fellow of his college this year! Isn't that a great honour for so young a man?" "Yes, indeed! It's the next thing to being in the 'Varsity eleven."

STRUGGLING AUTHOR (who has just read his last story to his wife): "There! that's the best thing I ever did." His Wife: "Yes dear; what magazine will you send it to first?"

"WHY do you ask me for my autograph?" asked the poet, who liked to hear words of praise. "Because you are the only one who can write it," said the applicant, meekly.

"I HEAR that your next door neighbours have a new American organ. Do you know how many stops it has?" Jackson: "Only about three a day, and those are only for meals."

SHE (hotly): "Why do men always lie to women?" He (cynically): "Well, the women always insist on complimentary things being said to them, don't they?"

MRS. ROCKS: "Mary Ann, these balusters seem always dusty. I was at Mrs. Prim's to-day, and her stair rails are clean and as smooth as glass?" Servant: "Yis, mum. She has t'ree small boys."

MRS. BINKS: "That woman we just passed is the nicest neighbour I ever had." Friend: "Neighbour? Why, she didn't so much as glance at you." Mrs. Binks: "That's what I like about her."

"I SUPPOSE," said the man, who had just been let out of jail, "the warden meant to be kind, but he wasn't exactly thoughtful." "What did he say?" "He wished me many happy returns of the day."

MRS. UPTON: "You will have to increase my allowance for servants' wages, my dear." Mr. Upton: "What for?" Mrs. Upton: "Our butler wants a valet, and my waiting maid wants a waiting-maid."

DINER: "Are the people who stop here usually very liberal?" Waiter: "Oh, yes, sir, they are very generous." Diner: "Ah, then, there's no necessity for me to give you anything."

HER father (sternly): "Genevieve, you are engaged to some young man." Herself: "Oh! father, how did you discover my secret?" Her father: "The gas bill for last month is suspiciously small."

"WHICH side of the street do you live on, Mrs. Kipple?" asked a counsel who was cross-examining a witness. "On either side, sir. If you go one way, it's on the right side; if you go the other way, it's on the left."

"NO, I don't want any accident policy." "But, sir—" "I say I don't want any. I took them out regularly for years, and never even had the satisfaction of being in the smallest kind of a railway smash-up."

"YOUR wife doesn't keep you long," said Hicks, as Digby returned to finish his smoke. "No," replied Digby, ruefully turning his trousers pockets inside out, "but she manages to keep me fearfully short."

ETHEL: "Yes, Hattie says that Jack made her a most impassioned declaration—actually threw himself at her feet—" Dora: "Really! Refreshing change, isn't it, when one remembers how often she's thrown herself at his head!"

MRS. CLIMBER: "My dear, Mrs. Highgump has had her portrait painted by a celebrated artist, and I haven't had a thing but common, ordinary, every-day photographs to show." Husband (a wise man): "Huh! The idea of advertising to the whole world that her complexion is so bad it won't stand the camera."

RURAL SIMPLICITY.—"I don't like your milk," said the mistress of the house. "What's wrong with it, mum?" "It's dreadfully thin and there's no cream on it." "After you've lived in the city awhile, mum," said the milkman, encouragingly, "you'll get over the rooral ideas o' yourn."

MERCHANT: "I always give the preference to a married clerk." Friend: "Why is that?" Merchant: "Because I find that they are not in such a hurry to get home of an evening as the others are."

NOT INCLUDED IN THE SALARY.—Merchant (catching his clerk making love to his daughter during business hours): "Why, Herr Muller, what is this? Do I pay you a salary for this kind of work?" Clerk: "No, I do it gratis."

AUNT HILDA: "Well, it do beat all! These city people are the worst gadders I ever heard on." Mrs. Meadow: "You have a niece there, haven't you?" Aunt Hilda: "Yes, and her card says she's never at home! 'cepting Thursdays."

"THE greatest misfortune that can happen to an actor is to lose his voice." To which an actor replied, "No, sir. Our greatest misfortune comes in when we have to play the part of a king or an emperor on the stage, and go to bed without supper."

LEFT HER IN THE LURCH.—De Garry: "You don't mean to say he left his wife in the lurch during the honeymoon?" Giles: "Yes, poor fellow! You see, they went South by boat on a wedding trip, and during a heavy sea he was lost overboard."

FATHER (to son who has failed in his examination three times): "I made a mistake in sending you to college. I ought to have apprenticed you to a locksmith or some other trade." "My dear father, I have often thought the same, especially when I have been out at night and have forgotten my latch-key."

THEATRICAL MANAGER: "What increase your salary? Man alive, don't you see that the audience ridicules you whenever you appear!" Actor: "That's the very reason why my salary should be increased. A man whose feelings are continually hurt by mockery is certainly entitled to extra remuneration."

NOT AN ACCIDENT.—"I hear that there has been an accident at the junction," said a reporter to a railway official. "No, sir; there has been no accident." "But two passengers fell from a train and were killed." "Possibly something of that kind happened, but there was no accident, sir. No railway property was injured. Good-day, sir."

AUNTY: "What became of the kitten you had when I was here before?" Little niece (in surprise): "Why, don't you know?" "I haven't heard a word. Was she poisoned?" "No, aunt." "Drowned?" "Oh, no." "Stolen?" "No, indeed." "Hurt in any way?" "No." "Well, I can't guess. What became of her?" "She grew into a cat."

A MAN rushed wildly from a public-house to a doctor's, and exclaimed: "Doctor, I've just swallowed a live toad for a wager; give me something to make me sick—quick!" The doctor eyed the excited man for a moment, and then quietly observed: "Well, if a live toad won't make you sick, I've nothing in my surgery that will."

A GENTLEMAN one day asked a shoeblack, who was cleaning his boots near a theatre in the Strand, if he ever read the newspaper. The boy promptly replied: "Oh, yes, sir; I reads the paper." "What do you read, my lad?" inquired the gentleman. "I reads all about murders, sir." A policeman standing near, who had heard the conversation, strolled up to the lad when the gentleman left, and said: "Don't you ever read the police intelligence?" "Get away with you; they ain't got none," answered the sharp boy.

THE officer of the deck on board a man-of-war vessel asked the man at the wheel one day, "How does she head?" It was blowing a gale of wind. "South'ast!" replied Pat, touching his hat, but forgetting to add "sir" to his answer. "You'd better put a few more s's in your answer when you speak to me," said the buffy lieutenant. "Ay, ay, sor-r-r," returned the Irishman. A day or two after the officer called out again: "How does she head now?" "South-ast an' be south, half south, an' a little southerly, sor-r-r, your honour, sor," shouted Pat at the top of his voice.

SOCIETY.

SILK is much used this season for street gowns.

THE Duke of Oporto, brother of the king of Portugal is one of the finest flute-players in the world.

SLEEVES have reached their limit and the most approved models are less balloon-like than heretofore.

THOUGH the Princess of Wales is a Dane by birth and her father is King of Denmark, she spent the whole of her early life in Germany, her father only taking his place as heir to the Danish throne a few years before her marriage.

THE Royal yacht *Osborne*, which returned to Portsmouth from the Mediterranean, is to undergo an overhaul during the next month. The Prince of Wales will join the yacht at Cowes on July 28th, and is to live on board during his stay in the Solent, which will extend over three weeks.

ON the 6th of July the streets in the West-end, which should present a magnificent appearance, will be entirely at the service of the public, and early in the evening all vehicular traffic is to be stopped in order that people may walk in the road to obtain a better view of the illuminations. Another attraction in the form of a grand display of fireworks in Hyde-park is mentioned.

A WONDERFULLY convenient bag has been invented which ladies can attach to their sides, and which can be made as ornamental as possible. Everything that a woman wants to carry about with her can be held in it, and it cannot be easily rifled. Princess May is to have one of these useful additions to the feminine toilette for a wedding present, so the popularity of the invention is a foregone conclusion.

THE Duke and Duchess of York will make their first connubial appearance in public after the honeymoon at Cowes, when it is expected that His Royal Highness will sail his father's yacht *Britannia* for the Queen's Cup. Osborne Cottage is to be put in a state of readiness for the young couple, and the Royal Yacht Squadron will do the honours of the Club royally. It is at Cowes that the Duke and Duchess will be formally presented to the German Emperor.

ANOTHER little son of the German Emperor and Empress enters the army this year. Prince Eitel Frederick, the second boy, will be ten years old on July 7, when, according to the traditions of the Hohenzollern family, he will be enrolled in the 1st Regiment of the Grenadier Guards. This little lad is the merriest and most mischievous of the six royal brothers, very unlike the young crown prince, who is almost too sober and dignified for his eleven years.

THE Duke and Duchess of York will begin their married life on a very much less ambitious scale than many a young bride and bridegroom who literally have their way to make in the world. The little cottage in which they will live at Sandringham all next autumn and winter only contains two very small sitting-rooms, besides a tiny business-room for the Duke of York, and there is not space for more than a couple of guests at a time. It is very simply but prettily furnished with light and seemingly very inexpensive furniture, and nearly all Princess May's girlish treasures, her stock of photographs, knickknacks, and the personal odds and ends with which she adorned her rooms at White Lodge, will be sent down here to make the little nest homelike.

THE German Emperor has abandoned his yachting cruise to Norway and Sweden, and he will visit Scotland instead. The Emperor will cruise along the coast from Aberdeen, and he is to visit the Orkney and Shetland Islands, and is then to proceed to the Hebrides, and will subsequently reach the Irish coast. It is expected that the Emperor will finally come down St. George's Channel and round the Land's End, his cruise terminating at Cowes on July 29th or 30th; and he will return to Germany the second week in August.

STATISTICS.

THERE are 15,170 free schools in England and Wales, with 3,429,577 children.

SOMETHING like 1,850,000 yards of looking-glass are manufactured annually in Europe.

SOMEONE has calculated that the postmen of London walk, together, something like 48,360 miles per day, a distance equal to twice the circumference of the globe.

A STATISTICIAN calculates that, in the year 2000, the ratio of those that will speak the English language to Europeans speaking any other languages will be three to one.

GEMS.

LITTLE minds rejoice over the errors of men of genius, as the owl rejoices at an eclipse.

So what signifies wishing for better times? We may make these times better if we bestir ourselves.

THE talent of success is nothing more than doing what you can do well, and doing well whatever you do.

HE who tells a lie is not sensible how great a task he undertakes, for he may have to invent twenty more to maintain one.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

STRAWBERRIES FOR DESSERT.—There are many ways in which a basket of strawberries may be used for dessert. There are the daintiest of strawberry-tarts made of fresh strawberries. These are simply shells of pastry filled with perfectly fresh, ripe berries well sweetened. After filling the "shells" with the sweetened berries, set them in the oven a few moments to let the sugar melt; then let the tarts cool, and serve them heaped with whipped cream. Shells of puff-paste can easily be procured from any French baker.

SHEPHERD'S PIE.—Half pound cold meat, half small onion, half tablespoonful of parsley, seasoning, water, mashed potatoes.—Cost, without meat, 4d. Chop the onion finely, and fry in dripping till brown, mince the meat and parsley, mix all well, put it in a pie-dish, and add a little water; cover with a thick layer of potatoes mashed with butter, put a few pieces of dripping on the top, and bake in a moderate oven for half an hour. This pie will be much improved by mixing two tablespoonfuls of tomato-ketchup with the meat.

ICE CREAM.—Take four breakfast-cups of milk, two tablespoons corn-flour, half pound sugar, one teaspoonful essence of vanilla; heat the milk, and add to it the corn-flour wet with a little cold milk; let it boil, then stir in the sugar and the vanilla, and set it aside to get quite cold, then freeze it. Any other flavour may be added instead of vanilla; lemon or strawberry, or a tablespoonful of chocolate may be boiled with the corn-flour, and is good for a change. The cream may be made with skim milk, and an egg put in well beaten up; after it has boiled that makes it a little yellow.

WILD DUCK.—A full-sized common duck will take from three-quarters of an hour to an hour in roasting, but a wild duck will take from forty to fifty minutes. Before carving, the knife should be drawn longitudinally along the breast, and upon it a little cayenne pepper must be sprinkled and a lemon squeezed. The ducks require a good made gravy like the following:—Simmer a tea-cupful of port, the same quantity of good gravy, a small shallot, with pepper, nutmeg, mace, and salt to taste, for about ten minutes; put in a bit of butter and flour; give it all one boil, and pour it over the bird, or serve in a sauce-tureen.

MISCELLANEOUS.

RAT-HUNTERS in France have a trades' union.

THE World's Fair has two miles of lunch counters.

THE idea of the church spire was originated in the twelfth century.

THE only bird quite peculiar to Britain is the red grouse.

THE Chinese endure change of climate better than any other race.

A RECENT invention is a triple pen, which rules the three lines of a cash column at one stroke.

THE pearl shells found on the coast of Western Australia are principally used for the manufacture of buttons.

THE Shah of Persia possesses a string of pearls brought up by the divers on the Persian coast, each individual pearl of which is nearly the size of a hazel nut.

THE finest ostrich feathers come from the part of the Syrian Desert lying east and north-east of Palestine, but they are rare and very costly.

A BRAZILIAN lady never goes shopping. Servants are sent for samples, and if it is a bonnet the senorita wants to buy, a box or basket containing all the latest Parisian styles is sent up for her inspection.

THE pigeons in Florence are of a pink colour, like the prevailing tint of the edifices on which they congregate. At Venice they are bluish-grey, to match the buildings of the latter city. Is this a case of protective mimicry?

HALF a century ago barrel-organs were to be heard in many churches. A barrel generally contained eight tunes; not more than four barrels could be got into one organ. The duties of the organist were then manifestly simple—they were confined to turning the handle.

IN Ireland there is a remarkable natural hole in the rocks of the seacoast known all over Britain as McSwiney's Gun. It is believed to be connected with a sea cavern. When the sea runs full the gun sends up a jet of water to the height of more than 100 feet, each spouting being preceded and followed by loud explosions.

ANIMALS grow old and wither away pretty much like plants. The blood-vessels as age advances, become hard, because lime-salts are deposited in their walls; their walls thicken, and their bore grows smaller. Then they can carry less blood, and so the body fails to receive proper nourishment. The muscles decrease in size; the bones dry up, and even the brain shrinks.

It is reported that a new mineral, the properties of which bear some resemblance to those of asbestos, has recently been discovered in the shape of immense deposits in Columbia, South America. The mineral is amber-coloured, transparent, and non-combustible. Experiments have been carried out at Bogota, which tend to prove that the new substance can be used in the production of banknotes.

As soon as a Chinese girl is betrothed, she is placed in different relations to the world generally. She is no longer allowed such freedom as hitherto, although that may have been little enough. She cannot go anywhere, because it would be inconvenient—she might be seen by some member of the family into which she is to marry—than which it is hardly possible to think of anything more horrible. "Why!" the irrepressible Occidental inquires, and is quenched by the information that "it would not be proper." Why it would not be proper no one can ever tell, except that it never was proper, and therefore, it is not now and never will be. The imminent risk that the girl at some unguarded moment might be seen by the family of the future mother-in-law is a reason why so few engagements for girls are made in the town in which the girl lives—an arrangement which would seem to be for the convenience of all parties in a great variety of ways.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

JUNO.—Your handwriting is fair.

H. I. M.—We cannot tell where you could obtain it.

C. E. B.—You had better apply to whatever Company you would prefer to join.

AMBITIOUS.—You ought to have a little personal instruction.

A SUBSCRIBER.—Hans Christian Andersen's father was a poor cobbler.

PERE.—A boy over fifteen is too old to be received into the navy.

J. C.—We cannot give an opinion on the safety of any business undertaking.

A CONSTANT READER.—Diving bells were invented by a Dutch mariner in 1509.

GORDON GREY.—The Sultan has decided to admit Jews to serve in the Turkish army.

COPS.—The American, French, Austrian, &c., armies have regimental bands.

BABETTE.—Many women wear the wedding ring first and the engagement as a guard ring.

SATIRE CAMP.—If your lodgers will not leave after legal notice you may forcibly eject them.

CATHERINE.—If thick paper is pasted over the back of picture frames it keeps out the dust.

FLORA.—The favourite flower of the Princess of Wales is the lily of the valley.

LITTLE GYP.—Submit it to the inspection of a dealer in pearls, who will be able to give its market value.

M. T.—Large ears, drooping at the top, belong to persons more animal than human.

WEE WIFE.—If you use a very fine quill pen you will not find the marking ink spread.

DOUGLAS.—The sabre is an oriental weapon. It was introduced into the French cavalry in 1710.

MURRAY.—Clerkships in any bank are usually obtained through the recommendation of a director.

SIMPLE SOE.—The engagement-ring is worn on the third finger of the left hand.

GEOR.—Eighty distinct varieties of oranges have been produced by cultivation.

ROSITA.—Rub the glazed part gently the wrong way with very fine sand paper, shake and brush.

FRANCESCA.—Nothing is of any use except a dye, and we do not advise anyone to use such means.

FRITZ.—Most writers would use the plural, but the singular is admissible.

JO.—The area of the great Sahara desert is equal to that of the United States.

LAURENCE.—Dissection of human bodies by medical students has been practiced since B.C. 320.

ARTIE.—The French people still fight an average of four thousand duels every year.

CONSTANT READER.—The petard was an instrument of war, employed for blowing open gates with gunpowder.

PRIVATE.—Education and good conduct in the ranks nowadays bring promotion surely, if slowly.

AMBITIOUS.—To patent it, apply for a form at your nearest post-office, or employ a patent agent.

ANXIOUS MARIAN.—It is caused by eating things which do not agree with you, and of course they should be avoided.

DAK.—The expression "It suits me to a T." comes from the use of the T square. A thing that fits to a T fits exactly, its angles are true, and its sides square.

L. Y.—An excellent remedy is to sponge the forehead, the back of the ears, and the back of the neck for several minutes with water as hot as possible.

A SUBSCRIBER.—Government makes no provision for the widows of the soldiers who die otherwise than from injuries received in their military calling.

T. M.—The Princess will soon become a "Royal"—from a "Serene"—Highness; then, of course, her proper title will be Princess Victoria, Duchess of York.

DAINTY DORA.—Cream will remove tan from the face and hands; also glycerine diluted with fresh lemon juice.

PERPLEXED PHYLLIS.—No length of desertion legalises a second marriage by a wife while the first husband is living.

JAQUES.—The *Alabama* was sunk off Cherbourg by the *Kearsage* on the 19th of June, 1864; her captain died in September, 1877.

NINA.—For people in moderate circumstances, extravagant outfits are not only unnecessary but extremely unwise.

PENELOPE.—If charcoal is used, the best plan is to hold it occasionally, afterwards thoroughly drying it in an oven.

LADY TEAZLE.—If you merely want it for theatricals, then use a wig. The washing off would be more difficult than the putting on.

IGNORANT ONE.—Moliere was the son of an upholsterer, who tried in vain to teach his son the rudiments of the business.

ROSALIA.—To May the emerald is in legend sacred—a jewel that discovers false friends and ensures true love.

RUTHERFORD.—The greater part of the ostrich feathers used by manufacturers are still supplied by South Africa.

POOR REPITA.—In good society, we believe, it has always been the rule to return such presents, as well as all notes exchanged during the betrothal.

REDMUND.—Great Britain is ordinarily rated as first, having the largest active list and the greatest number of armoured ships.

JERRY.—It is quite a recognised fact that the hearing of the horse is more acute than that of the human being.

VICTOR.—The word "patent" cannot be legally used upon a manufactured article after the patent has expired, or has been allowed to lapse.

SELINA.—Sweet and aromatic odours are cooling to rooms. They bar out the heat-rays of the sun, chiefly allowing those of light to enter.

ONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.—Quill pens were first used A.D. 553; steel pens were invented by Wise, of England, 1805, and improved by Gillott, 1822.

LENNOX.—There is no way of restoring the colour of a felt hat except by dyeing the felt, which involves blocking over again, and it is quite beyond your power.

VIVIAN R.—Your simplest way of finding out a solicitor's address is to consult a copy of the "Law List." Any lawyer could let you see it, or you might probably find a copy at your local police court.

OMUND.—Palimetry declares that the strength of one's will is evidenced by the formation of the thumb, the will-power of its owner being great or little according to the length or want of length of its upper joint.

UP-TO-DATE.—The custom of men wearing black clothes for evening-dress is said to have had its origin in the black military tunic which was worn nearly 300 years ago.

A SONG OF WAITING.

I HAVE waited for your coming as the blossoms
In the lily buds of winter wait the spring;
As the robins with the red upon their bosoms
Await the sweet and sunny time to sing.

I have listened for your coming as the meadows
Low-listen for the dew-fall in the night;
As the daisies droop and dream toward the shadows,
As the leaves in darkness listen for the light.

Would the violets unveil their velvet glory
If the sweet dew ceased to kiss them and to cling?
Would we ever know the robin's tender story
If there never came a sunny time to sing?

Let the dew the meadow's violets discover!
Let the robin sing his sweetest, for he knows
There is never any love without a lover—
You are coming, and the world blooms like a rose!

F. L. S.

RECKLESS RALPH.—There is no free emigration to the Cape at present. The fare to Cape Town by third-class open berths, for men only, is from ten to twelve guineas.

B. D. C.—If no will be found, the registrar of the district in which the owner of the property resided will, at your solicitation, suggest the mode of procedure in such cases.

PRUDENCE.—Big heads do not always indicate intellect. A scientist points out that the Greeks, one of the most intellectual of nations, were one of the smallest headed of races.

INSIGNIFICANT.—We fear you must make up your mind to the inevitable. You can do nothing to increase your height now. You may gain the half inch if you wait for another year or two.

UNHAPPY ONE.—What you have is chronic indigestion; all the pains you describe are symptoms of it, and the cure for that is to be found in a rearrangement of diet and general habits of life.

AN OLD READER.—The name "pound" as a place for keeping stray animals arose from the English law that the owner had to pay one pound sterling before he could recover his stock.

DISTRESSED.—The particular state or condition of each individual, the variety of constitutions, and other circumstances, must be taken into account. But, as a rule, if you feel yourself as cheerful after as before dinner, rest assured you have made a dietetical meal.

T. P. G.—It is quite evident that any person in good health, doing a large amount of physical and mental work, requires more sustenance than one who under the same conditions passes a sedentary and inactive existence.

EVADNE.—The yellow lily is held to be emblematic of gaiety; the day lily of evanescence; the white lily of sweetness; the lily of the valley unconscious sweetness; while the water lily betokens elegance and purity of heart.

HOUSEWIFE.—Lemons may be kept for a considerable length of time in perfectly cold water; but they must be deposited in an open jar, not a closed one, and at the same time in a cold place. Watch carefully and change the water every day.

IN DOUBT.—It is somewhat difficult to advise you how to act, but you certainly have a perfect right to take prompt steps to ascertain the gentleman's intentions. No one could accuse you of unwomanly conduct for so doing.

LANCELOT.—The original act of premunire was directed against aggressions of the Church, the Roman Catholic dignitaries having in course of time practically usurped royal functions; the meaning of the word is doubtful, but its intention is clear.

PETER P. G.—Reeds were in common use some fifty years ago in the North of England for addressing parcels on brown paper. They give a bold, strong writing, such as no quill or steel pen can give. The common bulrush with a thick head is the reed used.

DOT.—The sponge is an animal. It will shrink from the hand which tries to seize it, and if viewed under a lens may be seen constantly drawing in water through the innumerable canals which form its digestive organs, and having consumed the minute animalcules in the fluid, ejecting it again through some other channel.

ONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.—Cockney is a term exclusively applied to a native of London. It arose from the fact that he was always confined within the limits of the city walls. But in these days of frequent change and travelling, the true Cockney is fast becoming a thing of the past.

ROSABEL.—To keep cut roses an authority recommends changing the water twice a day and clipping the ends of the stems at each changing. Use cool, not cold water. Put white and yellow roses near the window; set the vases holding the red and pink roses in a dark corner of the room.

MABEL.—The best cure is to rub them at night with an ointment made as follows:—With an ounce of elder flower ointment, well mix twenty grains of sulphate of zinc. In the morning wash it off with honey soap, and apply a lotion made of an infusion of rose petals (half-pint) and thirty grains of citric acid.

A DREAMER.—June has from the time of the Romans been regarded as a particularly happy month for marriages, and it is from this period that the superstition dates regarding May, the gods who were inimical to domestic bliss being supposed to have it all their own way in the "merry month."

CONSTANT READER.—Fire-lighters are made by mixing two parts of sawdust (hardwood preferred) and one of rosin in greased tin moulds, which are then put into an oven until the rosin melts and cements the whole into a pasty mass; the moulds are then withdrawn and allowed to cool, when the lighters are extracted and put in papers for sale.

TUDOR.—The use of so-called slang terms should always be avoided. While it is not necessary to be so very particular in the choice of words as to render conversation very formal, the rules of good society demand that conversations be carried on with due regard to the proprieties of the occasion, and with due respect to those we address.

BEREAVED ONE.—While, as a rule, it is not incumbent on anyone to acknowledge cards or letters of condolence, there is no impropriety in answering such letters, especially if received from dear friends or relatives. Under any circumstances, the person condoled with is not expected to be in haste to make his or her acknowledgments. A reasonable time after the funeral should be allowed to elapse ere making them.

MAGPIE.—The black clothes you wish to reddenate should be thoroughly cleaned. Then boil four ounces of logwood for half an hour in a boiler, or copper, containing two or three gallons of water. Dip the clothes in warm water, squeeze them thoroughly, then lay in the copper and boil for another half hour. Hang them on a line or clothes horse for an hour or two, and upon taking down, rinse them well in three cold waters. You should then dry the cloth, and well rub it with a soft brush, on which a few drops of olive oil have been sprinkled.

LITTLE SUNSHINE.—Four oranges should be well boiled and chopped finely, taking out all pips; six ounces of fresh butter, twelve almonds (blanched and chopped), with one half pound of sifted sugar, should be put into a saucepan, to which should be added the orange pulp and the juice of one lemon. This should be put on a hot plate to warm, and all mixed together until the butter is thoroughly melted. Then turn the mixture out, let it get cold, and add eight eggs well whipped. Then put all into a baking dish, bordered with puff pastry, and bake from half an hour to forty minutes, according to the heat of the oven.

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